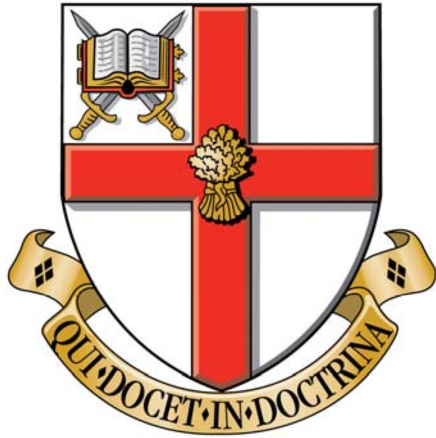

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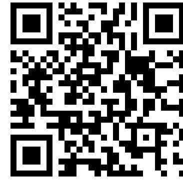

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http://chesterrep.openrepository.com

Author(s): Katy Meyers ; Howard Williams

Title: Blog bodies: Mortuary archaeology and blogging

Date: 2014

Originally published in: Blogging archaeology

Example citation: Meyers, K., & Williams, H. (2014). Blog bodies: Mortuary archaeology and blogging. In D. Rocks-Macqueen, & C. Webster (Eds.), *Blogging archaeology* (pp. 152-178). Landward Research, 2014.

Version of item: Published version

Available at: http://hdl.handle.net/10034/ 316459

BLOGGING ARCHAEOLOGY

Edited by Doug Rocks-Macqueen and Chris Webster

Published by Landward Research Ltd in Association with Succinct Research and DIGTECH LLC

Succinct Research

DIGTECH
THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

http://landward.eu/ | www.succinctresearch.com | http://www.digtech-llc.com/

ISBN 978-0-9572452-1-1

Edited by Doug Rocks-Macqueen and Chris Webster

Copyediting and Front Cover Design: Quonya Huff

Authors (Alphabetical):

Matt Armstrong

Matthew Austin

David Gill

Maria Beierlein de Gutierrez

Sam Hardy

Emily Johnson

Kristina Killgrove

Bernard Means

Katy Meyers

Doug Rocks-Macqueen

Jessica Rymer

Jaime Almansa-Sánchez

Lucy Shipley

Chris Webster

Katy Whitaker

William White

Howard Williams

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Blog Bodies: Mortuary Archaeology and Blogging

Katy Meyers
Blog: http://bonesdontlie.wordpress.com/ [ccxxvi]
Howard Williams
Blog: http://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/ [ccxxvii]

Introduction: Mortuary Archaeology Today

Mortuary archaeology - the study of past beliefs and practices surrounding dying, death and the dead using archaeological theories, methods and techniques - is a rich, diverse and growing field of research that incorporates, and extends beyond, bioarchaeology (osteoarchaeology) in its scope (Parker Pearson 1999; Tarlow and Nilsson Stutz 2013a). This particular subfield has many dimensions, a global reach and the scope to study human engagements with mortality from earliest times to the present day. Mortuary archaeology is inseparable from other kinds of archaeology - it inevitably overlaps with material culture analyses, settlement studies and landscape archaeology. It incorporates many specialists scientific techniques used to analyse artefacts, bones and other materials retrieved from mortuary contexts.

The archaeology of death also extends far beyond the study of mummified human cadavers and articulated and disarticulated skeletal remains (burnt or unburnt). It also involves: considering artefacts and ecofacts from mortuary contexts; the structure and arrangement of graves; burial chambers and tombs; a wide range of art, architectures, monuments and memorials to the dead. Mortuary archaeology incorporates both cemeteries and other spaces designed to commemorate the dead, the spatial relationships between mortuary locales and the evolving landscape in which they are situated. The archaeology of death and burial can be site-specific, or it can look within particular localities or regions. Likewise, it can look at single periods

or they can chart the development and shifts in mortuary practice over many centuries and millennia.

Taking these various points into account, it is evident that today's mortuary archaeology not only has multiple dimensions and scales of analysis, but also many tendrils into, and explicit dialogues with, other disciplines. For instance, the archaeological and bioarchaeological investigation of death, burial and commemoration can involve close dialogue with cultural anthropologists as well as with social historians of death. Equally, mortuary archaeology shares and exchanges ideas and perspectives with: sociologists and theologians of death, dying and bereavement; studies of the representation and material culture of death; and memory by art-historians and architectural historians. Bearing these points in mind, for both prehistoric and historic eras, mortuary archaeology reveals increasingly new and fascinating insights into human engagements with mortality across time and space.

Public Mortuary Archaeology

A key part of mortuary archaeology is public engagement. The discovery of human bodies, fragmented or articulated, both fascinates and disturbs, and simultaneously intrigues and repels. Tombs, graves, mummies and bog bodies are widespread icons of archaeology. For instance, mortuary archaeology embodies the romance of discovery and the mythologies surrounding archaeologists' fictional meddling with supernatural powers, embodied in the stories and reception of the excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb. To this day, excavations of graves, cemeteries and human remains are among the most widely popularised archaeological research.

This fascination with human remains in Western modernity might be dismissed as ghoulish and unnatural, but it can be situated in relationship to global media trends and shifts in a variety of senses (Asma 2012). Deaths of individuals and of entire populations is now seen and witnessed in the media more than ever before. Conversely, Western society is obsessed with the mental and physical health of the self and with the maintenance of corporeal beauty; so death disturbs and

challenges the body-project and the vision of the healthy society (e.g. Jupp and Walter 1999). Moreover, the focus on the body's mortality chimes with Western modernity's consideration of the self as bound to individual corporeality (Crossland 2009).

Set against this background, it is unsurprising that, from the study of Neanderthal graves to the forensic application of archaeological techniques in the study of recent mass-graves resulting from wartime atrocities, mortuary archaeology is high-profile and popular. Also for this reason, the archaeology of death is the focus of considerable political debate and the ethical dimensions of digging up and displaying the dead have been called into question and are subject to massive sea-changes in archaeological thinking and practice (e.g. Jenkins 2010; Sayer 2010; papers in Tarlow and Nilsson Stutz 2013a). In particular, the climate and conditions within which mortuary archaeology operates has seen recent and rapid shifts with the colonial tradition of digging and curation of artefacts and human remains extracted from mortuary sites across the world called into question and subject to calls for repatriation and reburial. This change has had a massive impact on mortuary archaeology across the Western world. For example, following protests and pressure from Native American communities and a revaluation of the role of museums themselves, the introduction of NAGPRA (*Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act)* in 1990 in the USA witnessed a radical shift in relationships between native tribes, the US government and the work of museums and other archaeological institutions and groups. Human remains are now rarely on display and increasingly rarely curated within anthropological collections (Giesen 2013). In the UK, there has been a more subtle trend over the last two decades towards the repatriation of human remains obtained from overseas, together with the increasing reburial of human remains excavated from British soil following a reinterpretation of the 1857 *Burial Act* in 2009 (see Parker Pearson et al. 2013). Still, in the UK and elsewhere in Europe, digging, displaying and curating human remains have continued to be seen as a legitimate and integral part of archaeological research by universities, museums and other sectors if subject to correct guidelines and due respect and dialogue with stakeholders and

descendant communities where they exist (e.g. Swain 2006; Sayer 2010; papers in Giesen 2013).

Archaeologists as Death-Dealers

Despite significant differences in national and regional policy and procedure, it remains the case that archaeologists are widely recognised across Western societies as a specific group of professionals who work close to death and the dead and a large part of their popular appeal comes from this relationship (Sayer 2010; Williams 2009: 201). The climate for this perception is worth noting. Modernity is often characterised as a time when death is distanced (Aries 1974). Medical advances and improving lifestyles and social infrastructures have made life expectancies soar across the world during the twentieth century. The process of dying, death and disposal are managed by innumerable specialists, professional and semi-professional groups. Many of us in the Western world can go for months, years or even decades without witnessing dying and death and few take a direct role in handling the bodies of the dying and the dead and arranging for their disposal.

Perhaps because of this increasing distance from death, linked to the medicalisation and secularisation of society as well as the professionalisation of death industries, mortuary archaeology has become a distinctive yet often overlooked group through which Western individuals can engage with the corporeality of death and a wider sense of mortality by engaging, in a relatively safe and sanitised fashion. Rather than the 'abject' engagement with just-dead corpses, archaeology offers the possibility of reflection upon the deaths of long-dead individuals and communities whom can be adopted as 'ancestors' without the powerful and painful emotions of mourning (e.g. Williams 2009). In this regard, there remains a secular aura of sacredness around many museum displays of human remains, and discussions persist regarding the need to show 'respect' and 'reverence' to the remains of long-departed humans from the sites of their excavation to museum stores and university laboratories, giving them names and giving them personalities that we conjure from artefacts and bones.

Therefore, in its many dimensions, from the study of early hominin fossils to the study of historic gravestones and cemeteries, mortuary archaeology has become more than a subject about death – the production of knowledge about death in the past- it has become a prominent medium for experiencing and understanding death in Western modernity. Mortuary archaeologists, as narrators about how past societies mourned, disposed of, and commemorated their dead in varying and changing ways, have become a principal Western form of death-dealer, mediating and narrating stories about dying, death and mortuary practice for the vast majority of the human past without written records (see also Kirk forthcoming). As death-dealers, mortuary archaeologists provide tangible, rich and varied sources of new evidence on mortality in prehistoric and historic eras and inform our sense of mortality in the present.

An Online Death Explosion

Despite the radically different environments in which mortuary archaeology takes place in the USA and UK and the spectrum of policies and procedures found around the globe (see papers in Clegg et al. 2013), the continuing role of mortuary archaeologists as a distinctive kind of professional and academic death-dealer permeates widely. Furthermore, national and regional differences in policy and procedure are overshadowed by a far more impressive trend than repatriation and reburial. Mortuary archaeology is increasingly taught, studied, researched, disseminated and debated through virtual media using the World Wide Web by archaeologists from a range of backgrounds: professional and semi-professional; academic; governmental; commercial; and museum-based. What is striking about this trend is how it has been largely escaped critical reflection by mortuary archaeologists themselves. Namely, while there has been a steady growth in academic literature evaluating mortuary archaeology's ethical dimensions and public engagement, how mortuary archaeology operates online, responding to, and even building public engagement, has largely escaped scrutiny (but see Renshaw 2013: 41).

We suggest that the reason for this is that mortuary archaeologists have taken a profoundly materialist and corporeal approach to the ethics and practicalities of studying human remains. Almost all the debates have focused on how, when and why should archaeologists dig up human remains and mortuary contexts? How, when and why should museums curate and display human remains? How, when and why should human remains and other mortuary derived artefacts be subject to repatriation and/or reburial? (e.g. papers in Clegg et al. 2013; Giesen 2013; Tarlow and Nilsson Stutz 2013a; Giles and Williams forthcoming). To date, no studies have taken place to explore how online media interact with all these questions and create new strategies and audiences for mortuary archaeological discoveries and analyses as well as to explore and debate the processes and nature of how these audiences and networks are created (Renshaw 2013; but see also Sayer and Walter forthcoming). Moreover, online media are interpretive environments in which human remains, artefacts and other materials and spaces are assembled to construct knowledge of human mortality, akin to Moser's (2010) vision of museum displays

Since the intervention of the Internet and the development of the World Wide Web, a wide range of applications and media thereon have developed that report subjects in mortuary archaeology. Established media of film, television, books and newspapers now have well-established and expanded online presences which feature mortuary archaeology in both fact and a wide range of fiction (see Sayer and Walter forthcoming). Furthermore, social media has facilitated the dissemination of many news stories about the archaeology of death and burial, as well as photographs and videos from museums and heritage sites to be disseminated to all and sundry.

Increasingly, archaeologists themselves have grappled with the 'archaeo-appeal' (Holtorf 2005: 150) of mortuary projects in a variety of ways. As well as publishers providing increasingly open access platforms for archaeological publications including mortuary discoveries, many online archaeology magazines feature burial archaeology stories for public consumption. Mortuary remains also feature on the websites of many heritage sites and museums whilst commercial archaeological companies showcase human remains upon their websites and host

innumerable grey literature reports listing new discoveries of graves, cemeteries and memorials. Moreover, many archaeologists, professional and amateur, have been writing their own online archaeology magazine stories, creating project websites and disseminating their discoveries and ideas through social media like Facebook and Twitter. Together, through all these avenues and more, the ancient dead have exploded across the World Wide Web and, on an unprecedented scale, the worldwide population can access stories about the discovery and study of human remains and mortuary contexts like never before.

The proliferation of archaeological death online has many ramifications that go beyond the concerns of existing ethical, political and procedural debates regarding the practice of mortuary archaeology. Who are the communities that are stakeholders in the dead? Which religious and ethnic groups should be afforded respect and sensitivity in relation to the human remains we uncover, report and discuss? Online communities are loose and complex, unbounded and varied, uncensored and unparalleled. Barriers of language, nationality, locality, physical appearance and issues of age, gender, race and other dimensions of personal identity can be manipulated or (de)emphasised online. In this environment, mortuary archaeologists are finding themselves communicating with a whole range of new online groups and individuals.

To put it baldly, it is becoming less clear whether the 'public' to which mortuary archaeology is most readily engaged with is the local community near the dig site, the museum visitor, or the consumer of specialist print publications, but instead to a vast, varied and complex online community. If this point is accepted as an important one for how we write and engage the public with mortuary archaeology, then national policies on the display and reburial of human remains, whilst remaining important topics for debate, are joined by a new need to debate how we utilise online media to explore and debate death in the human past as well as the theories, methods, and ethical concerns of mortuary archaeology. Archaeologists and heritage professionals need to afford detailed scrutiny to what, how and when we write online and its ethical, moral, academic, social and other ramifications. They also need to scrutinise the potential for online blogging to create a new

environment for disseminating mortuary archaeological research and producing new knowledge about human mortality (see also Sayer and Walter forthcoming).

Bones Don't Lie and *Archaeodeath*

It is against this background that there is a need to consider and discuss the rise in blogging about the archaeology of death (see also Meyers and Killgrove 2014). Here, we see mortuary archaeology as broader than blogging about the scientific analysis of human remains. As we define it above, mortuary archaeology, it encapsulates many more topics and interdisciplinary intersections than either 'burial archaeology' (excavating and surveying ancient burial sites) or 'bioarchaeology' (the analysis of human remains in particular). Using our experiences from the USA and UK, we critically explore the current use and future potential of blogging as a key medium of teaching and researching mortuary archaeology. We have both created blogs as mechanisms for exploring and disseminating our research interests in the archaeology and bioarchaeology of death, burial and commemoration. Let us explain our backgrounds and how we came to be mortuary archaeology bloggers.

Katy Meyers (KM) is a PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology, Michigan State University, USA [ccxxviii]. She began blogging through her Wordpress site Bones Don't Lie [ccxxix] as a way to discipline herself in keeping up-to-date with the latest archaeology news and archaeology publications in her chosen field of study. It has subsequently evolved as a widely read site for discussing new theories, methods and discoveries in mortuary archaeology from across the globe, including 5,500 followers from over fifty different countries through Wordpress, a Facebook community over 1,100 strong and 1,600 followers on Twitter. KM reports on the latest news from archaeological and anthropological magazines and news websites, the latest research published in academic journals, and sometimes she focuses on places and sites of particular affinity and interest to herself, particularly early historic mortuary practices and bioarchaeological analyses. Recent blog entries in 2014 have ranged from discussions of the antiquity of cancer [ccxxx] to the study of funerary trends and photography [ccxxxi]. KM distributes her

blog through Twitter, LinkedIn and Academia.edu on a weekly basis. Since her blog began in August 2010, KM has posted over 375 entries. Her work has been recognised in the *Oxford Annotated Bibliography* as top digital resource for bioarchaeology (Killgrove 2013), and is cited in *Bioarchaeology: An Integrated Approach to Working with Human Remains* written by Debra L. Martin, Ryan P. Harrod, Ventura R. Pérez in the chapter "The Future of Bioarchaeology" (Martin, Harrod and Ventura 2012) as a digital resource.

Howard Williams (HW) is Professor of Archaeology in the Department of History and Archaeology, University of Chester, UK [ccxxxii]. He was inspired to blog by *Bones Don't Lie* but also by the long-established archaeology blog Aardvarkaeology [ccxxxiii] by Swedish archaeologist Dr Martin Rundkvist. HW is relatively new to blogging. His Wordpress site Archaeodeath [ccxxxiv] is motivated in part by the frustrations experienced in relying on his own academic institution to promote his new publications and fieldwork as well as in part from the desire to communicate to a wider community than those attending his conference presentations and public talks. *Archaeodeath* was an experiment that continues to evolve and currently has to date a relatively modest 139 followers but regularly attracts a wider audience through dissemination via Facebook and Twitter. Currently *Archaeodeath* serves as an outlet for a range of topics [ccxxxv]. These include discussions of medieval and modern mortuary and commemorative practices, focused on HW's ongoing research projects including fieldwork at the Pillar of Eliseg, North Wales [ccxxxvi]: *Project Eliseg*. HW posts about his latest publications, academic conference presentations and public talks in early medieval and contemporary archaeology. HW also uses his blog to discuss his role as Honorary Editor for the Royal Archaeological Institute's [ccxxxvii] publication: the Archaeological Journal [ccxxxviii]. HW incorporates commentaries on visits to museums, ancient monuments, heritage sites and archaeological landscapes with a mortuary or memorial dimension. Finally, HW occasionally writes opinion pieces ("archaeorants") regarding directions and debates in the archaeology of death, burial and commemoration. Indeed, his most popular posting to date was an "archaeorant" about the excavation of King Richard III at the site of Greyfriar's church,

Leicester, that has been viewed 2,250 times to date far more than his other posts. His blogging began only recently, in June 2013 [ccxxxix],and since then HW has subsequently posted over 130 entries.

From our joint experience, we identify some specific issues that demand our attention in utilising blogging as a medium for archaeological publishing. Stopping short of presenting guidelines for good practice, we argue that blogging about ancient death is an important part of academic engagement with the public, however there are certain considerations regarding sensitivities, tone and use of imagery that must be taken into consideration.

Why Should Archaeologists Blog about Death? Pros and Cons

Stories about mortuary archaeology are online, disseminated and discussed regardless of whether they were written by practising scholars or not. The popular media has increasingly delved into mortuary archaeology as a topic of discussion and sensationalist news. Blogging as a medium allows for archaeologists to rapidly publish and openly share new ideas, discoveries and debates without and sometimes overtly questioning, the spin and inaccuracies of the journalists who regularly report archaeological stories. Further, blogs are often more approachable than journal articles due to the high cost of access and complicated jargon utilised in the latter. Blogging is also a more liberated medium for archaeological writing, allowing responses and hence dialogue, unrestrained by the precise conventions of academic publishing; in this regards, it shares a powerful position in its relationship on a spectrum between academic and creative writing (see also Kirk forthcoming).

Furthermore, by increasing our involvement in online discussions about the field, we improve the overall perception and understanding of ancient death and direct both specialists and the wider public to the ever-evolving literature on this topic. In this regard, with a potential worldwide audience embracing many ethnicities and faiths, archaeologists have the responsibility to disseminate as far and wide

their discoveries. Moreover, they have the duty to explain the value of digging up, curating and displaying the dead where deemed appropriate and acceptable to descendant communities, academic research questions and other factors.

Given the rapid dissemination of information through the Internet, mortuary archaeology news will be reported on whether or not we want it. Due to this, archaeologists are advocated to control the story through disseminating it, not through hiding it (Sayer 2010). Rather than concealing death, archaeologists should be educators and enablers of community engagement with death. Blogging about mortuary archaeology can challenge misconceptions in the popular media (Meyers and Killgrove 2014). Furthermore, sometimes archaeologists can be lobbyists through their blogs, arguing for changes in the law and in attitudes and practices, or, as with the social media campaign against the proposed National Geographic TV show 'Nazi War Diggers', actively vocalising concerns over the ethics of their actions in digging up war-graves without utilising trained archaeologists or bioarchaoelogical methods and expertise. Examples of this are the forthright postings by Deathsplaining [ccxl] on this topic.

An example of the work that can be done by mortuary archaeologists to support research and prevent sensationalism is the rise of 'vampire burials' over the past few years. On *Bones Don't Lie*, the actual journal articles and evidence that led to these accusations of vampirism have been explored and broken down in Archaeology of Vampires, Part I [ccxli] and Part II [ccxlii]. KM is able to coherently convey that there is no evidence of vampires themselves, but rather there is evidence of behaviour to prevent perceived vampire-like activity among the deceased. While it is a small matter of perception, it is important that we be active proponents of evidence-based research, rather than silently critiquing popular media.

Another example comes from *Archaeodeath*. The sensationalist finding of Richard III was widely publicised, but no-one had been talking about the broader issue of what this excavation meant with regard to the popular perception of mortuary archaeology. HW was able to articulate that the real problem was not the organisation and focus of

the investigation, the evidence or the way it was discussed - rather it was the fact that this overshadowed the important process of mortuary archaeology in exploring process, variability and change, not the graves of named historic personages. In 'What is truly wrong about digging up Richard III [ccxliii]', HW argues that celebrity excavations detract attention from the population-level study of mortuary variability and change in the Middle Ages and other periods. It also detracts from the shameful neglect of many skeletal populations following excavation. Finally, HW argued that the search for celebrity burials constitutes a form of royal necrophilia in its fetishistic focus on reconstructing the identity of a single individual from the past.

Finally, the rise of mortuary archaeology blogging is part of a bigger trend of bringing back conversations about death. Death used to be part of the home, part of the average life, it was photographed, discussed and there was ownership over it. Death as a topic for discussion is coming back; groups like Order of the Good Death[ccxliv] or Death Salon[ccxlv] have been discussing death and related topics. As part of this broader trend, mortuary archaeologists have an important role to play by providing the historic and prehistoric context of how death has changed through time. Further, mortuary archaeologists have a deeper understanding of the variability of death and mourning behaviour. By engaging in these broader discussions occurring online we provide an important service of normalizing death related behaviour by situating it in its historical context and discussing its variation.

These points lead us to a broader consideration about the potential for blogging on death in the human past and in archaeological practice for mortuary archaeologists – from those building careers (e.g. KM) to those more established in the field (e.g. HW) to operate as public intellectuals, contributing towards, challenging and driving new directions in popular thinking about dying, death and the dead in the past and present (see contributions to Tarlow and Nilsson Stutz 2013b). Whilst we make no grand claims to be achieving this ourselves at this stage in our blogging, this medium affords new voices operating in less restricted and less hierarchical structures and thus perhaps more democratising (or indeed subversive). Blogging offers a means of distributing and debating mortuary topics that escapes from the

stranglehold of the media of television documentaries and newspaper stories that favour a small academic elite as well as only a selection of mortuary topics focusing on the discovery of fleshed human remains in particular (e.g. mummies and bog bodies). To put boldly, KM has acquired during her graduate studies a far more extensive network and platform via her blogging than many expert mortuary archaeologists can ever hope to enjoy through their academic writing or brief appearances as talking heads on television documentaries. Moreover, the blog is arguably a more rich, informative and enduring medium compared with the brevity and simplicity and singular voices that these established media afford and with the potential of driving new views and perspectives that might have weight outside the academy (e.g. Larsson 2013).

Despite these many positive reasons for writing online, we can appreciate the inertia and ambivalence of some archaeologists towards blogging about mortuary matters. First, many groups involved in museum and field projects may have tight restraints imposed by employers, developers or funding bodies regarding strategies for disseminating their finds and copyrights. For example, housing developers might not want publicity that human remains were found during excavations to affect the sale-price of their flats and housing. It also may infringe upon established policies within some organizations. Second, local communities and descendant communities might wish to avoid too much publicity in fear of attracting disrespectful comments and attention as well as treasure-hunting and illicit excavations at the sites of discovery. Archaeologists might wish to avoid criticisms of, and appropriations of, their methods and techniques by blogging, ahead of formal publication. In such scenarios, details of their fieldwork projects might fear a compromising of their professional perception. Archaeologists might be reluctant to post information about mortuary remains found during excavation until a trained physical anthropologist has had the time to analyse the remains, and other post-excavation analyses have been conducted. For many archaeologists, blogging might be seen as too much ceding of authority and control over knowledge production and dissemination, without peer-review and the ability to verify facts and argumentation. Finally, concerns over blogging

might be related to the archaeological finds themselves, some deemed too disturbing to exhibit them via a blog because of perceived issues of ethics, taste and aesthetics.

We would not attempt to refute any of these concerns as illegitimate. in specific instances, and blogging strategies should be adapted to avoid likely pitfalls. However, in many ways these concerns are attempts to lock the stable door after the horse has bolted. Censorship of mortuary archaeology online is impossible to achieve since so much is already uploaded. Moreover, secrecy online regarding key mortuary archaeology stories and discoveries can breed misunderstandings and the perceptions of elitism or even of conspiracies of silence regarding discoveries (see Sayer 2010). Every archaeologist must weigh the pros and cons themselves; however it is argued here that the positive aspects of blogging far outweigh the challenges, and many of these concerns can be avoided through mindful attention to potential problems. Therefore, blogging in some form should be regarded as an important and integral part of mortuary research by archaeologists.

How Should Archaeologists Blog about Death? Debating the Tenor of Death

There are no pre-set guidelines for blogging about mortuary archaeology, or death in general. The Internet has proven time and time again that any topic can and will be shared. However, as scholars, we need to be aware of broader ethical and emotional concerns that come with talking about death and the deceased. At all times, there must be a clear awareness of the sensitivity of death. Here, we discuss how the use of different literary devices such as humour, metaphor and shock can be employed in blogging to create a deeper public connection to death in the past, but must be used carefully to avoid diminishing or disrespecting the deceased.

Determining when to exercise sensitivity is primarily up to the author, however there are topics where careful use of imagery and awareness of tone is important. Over the past couple of years, there has been debate around the Tophet of Carthage. The site contains the burials of

hundreds of cremated infants, and since its discovery there has been argument over whether the site represents a ritual site of human sacrifice, or a special cemetery reserved for this age group. The debate has led to sensationalist news reports with headlines like "Carthaginians sacrificed their own children, archaeologists say [ccxlvi]" or "Ancient Greek stories of ritual child sacrifice in Carthage are TRUE, study claims [ccxlvii]". News stories like these do not however share the detailed archaeological and archival evidence, nor do they discuss the deeper reasons for this practice and the historical context. To counteract this, KM wrote multiple blog posts including "Ancient Baby Graveyard or Infant Sacrifice Site [ccxlviii]" and "Cemetery or Sacrifice Site in Carthage, Again [ccxlix]" discussing all the available evidence and all related journal articles. As archaeological bloggers, it is important to challenge this type of sensationalism, and objectively discuss the evidence so that popular audiences might better read between the journalistic spin.

Because HW's interests extend from the early historic period to the present day, *Archaeodeath* contends with the commemorative practices of recent centuries. This is evident in the entries about cathedral memorials at Chester [ccl] and Norwich [ccli] as well as discussions of memorials on public spaces such as country parks and roadside memorials [cclii]. In addition to discussing sites visited about ongoing research (without outlining the details of the research itself), HW has attempted to outline new ways of thinking afresh about well-studied and well-visited buildings and landscapes in our contemporary society and from the perspective of mortuary archaeology. For example, for roadside memorials, HW is taking a perspective usually afforded to far more ancient remains and applying them to a very sensitive dimension of present-day memorial practice through the medium of the blog, thus simultaneously challenging how

Dead Funny: Using humour to discuss death

Tone is important for blogging as it can range from conversational to academic. When dealing with topics of death, it is important to be aware to the possibility that the reader might be sensitive to the language utilised. Having said that, archaeologists should avoid being

either overly maudlin or euphemistic. Archaeologists may be death-dealers, but we are not undertakers dealing with newly bereaved families. Our writing can be upbeat, even humorous, if it serves to communicate our message. Therefore, while no single tenor of writing should be recommended, being too sensitive and obscure can be a hindrance more than a help. Death and comedy have long been good bedfellows, and the combination of the two has proven quite successful in modern medical settings. Thorson (1985) argued that "death humor is seen to have functions both as a defense mechanism as well as a social lubricant", further it gives the dying and bereaved a sense of control over death. In clinical settings, joking has been proven to relieve anxiety, decrease discomfort, provide coping mechanisms, as well as increase comprehension and retention in educational settings (Johnson 1990). Comedy can be used for archaeological blogging in a similar manner. By infusing some jests in our work, we remove some of the unnecessary mystery, discomfort and fear surrounding death.

Both KM and HW have used humour as a mechanism for lightening an otherwise dark topic but are always sensitive to the challenge that humour online is readily misinterpreted as 'disrespect'. In general, *Bones Don't Lie* provides commentary on journal and news articles broadly relating to mortuary archaeology, which are written with an academic and respectful tone. However, witty posts are often intermixed into these more serious publications in order to provide levity and prevent reader burnout. "Waiter there's a toe in my drink" was a blog post that discussed an absurd example of cannibalism from a modern news article. Another example was "The Santa Issue II" [ccliii], which proposed what the fictional burials of different incarnations of Santa Claus would look like if they were excavated by archaeologists.

For *Archaeodeath*, HW attempts to mix humour into posts on otherwise serious matters. For example, in a recent post regarding a visit to the Neolithic site of Woodhenge, HW parodied the title of a famous article from the Journal *Antiquity* as 'Woodhenge for the ancestors: the concrete cylinders pass on the message' [ccliv]. HW reviews the latest evidence about this monument, appraises its heritage presentation, but then adds some lighter comments regarding the merits of the site for exercise and child's play, satirsing but not deriding both academic and

popular perceptions of Neolithic monuments as sites of healing. In other posts, HW restricts humour to the titles and occasional references to popular culture in otherwise more dense discussions of sites, monuments and other archaeological remains, as in the entries "Completely Stoned in Ceredigion 1 [cclv] and 2" [cclvi]. In the former, HW likens the carving of human figures on one early medieval stone cross to characters from Schultz's Peanuts cartoons. A more overtly humorous commentary is "Talking Archaeo-heads [cclvii]", yet it is still a reflection on a serious heritage issue for mortuary archaeology: the widespread use, almost an obsession, with facial reconstruction in archaeological museums and visitor centres. HW sees this as a mechanism by which new 'ancestors' are created and venerated by museums (see also Williams 2009) but also muses what these heads would say if they could see us in the present day, both their museum environment and visitors.

Other blogs on human remains utilise humour more regularly, overtly and effectively, notably the superb Deathsplaining [cclviii] blog. Whether used sparingly or frequently, humour has the ability to lighten topics that may be difficult for readers to confront, and used sparingly can be a good way of breaking up what have the potential to be very sombre readings. It can also be a way of lightening critiques of mortuary displays and practices.

The Past in the Present: Making connections to modern phenomena

One of the challenges of blogging about ancient death is making it relevant to the modern audience. Our selection of titles for our blogs in itself calls out to popular audiences. *Bones Don't Lie* making a rhetoric statement about the evidential power of human remains to tell us about past societies and dispel mythologies and speculation. Meanwhile *Archaeodeath*'s title was intended as tongue-in-cheek pomposity yet also succinct and memorable. It was also intended as an accurate description of the blog's focus: consciously avoiding a focus on bones but citing the principal connections of archaeology and mortality as key to the blog's subject matter.

Popular news has been quite effective at making connections to the public by exploring the more sensational side of mortuary studies. Examples include the supposed discovery of vampire burials across Eastern Europe, or the search for celebrity burials like Richard III or Mona Lisa. There are two major ways of making connections that we have used repeatedly: drawing connections between physical spaces and popular media.

In *Archaeodeath*, HW repeatedly introduces concepts and themes from his research through the use of popular examples of particular well-known sites and landscapes, such as critiques of museum displays of mortuary contexts - "Stonehenge Incomplete 1 [cclix] and 2 [cclx]", "Roman Death at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester [cclxi]" or "Old Mold Gold" [cclxii]. Then there are discussions of the material cultures of death at heritage sites and country parks – "Bodnant Garden - Death in the Family Garden" [cclxiii] or "Gazing through the Lens" [cclxiv] - or else explorations of commemorative practice in the past and the present such as: "Moor Memories - Dartmoor" [cclxv] and "The Childe of Hale" [cclxvi]. By exploring the past through these physical places, readers gain a deeper appreciation for their local heritage and are encouraged to explore these - and other similar - spaces themselves with a new, archaeological perspective.

In *Bones Don't Lie*, KM explores the concept that one of the easiest ways to aid people in better understanding death is to create connections to popular media. The use of metaphor can improve affinity with, and understanding of, complex topics within mortuary archaeology. KM has used movies such as "Weekend at Bernie's" [cclxvii] as an illustration for understanding the complexities of interpreting human remains. Over the course of a single weekend, the corpse of Bernie Lomax is subjected to a number of activities including attending a party, playing monopoly, getting buried in the sand and even dragged behind a boat. None of these activities would have been readily apparent to the individuals excavating a grave. However, there could be important signs of post-mortem activity if examined carefully. Similarly, Anthony Bourdain, popular foodie, chef and television host, inspired a post [cclxviii] that drew connections between modern food television shows to funerary behaviour in the past. We often do not know what happens

between death and burial, and using a popular movie can help illustrate how important that information can potentially be.

Razor's Edge of Challenging Perceptions and Shocking

In many ways, we play an important role in the broader shift to discussions of death and dying. In the modern world where death is medicalised and bereavement is often hidden, archaeologists can offer insight into alternative options and discuss how this current state of death has occurred. We provide historical context for broader debates relating to death and human remains. Further, we have unique insight to challenge monolithic perceptions of death by presenting the wide range of variation that exists in the world. However, there is a thin line between challenging the current beliefs and shocking the audience. The goal should not be to appal an audience, but rather to push the limits of their perception and challenge their preconceived notions regarding death and the dead.

Last year, the web exploded in outrage over a trend known as 'Funeral Selfies' [cclxix], whereby teens were using camera phones to take photos of themselves whilst at a funeral. While most audiences were disgusted, Caitlin Doughty, creator of the Order of the Good Death and a Los Angeles-based mortician, argued that we need to be more aware of what this behaviour actually means. She argues that instead of disgust towards teens, we should focus more on educating them, and recognise their behaviour as an outlet for ritual and mourning not found in Western Society (Doughty 2013). However, this is where taking a historic perspective can help others better understand this behaviour. In many ways, the funeral selfie trend is just a reincarnation of post-mortem photography from the 19th century. This was discussed by KM in a blog post [cclxx] following the modern phenomenon, and it allowed for a broader discussion about the incorporation of technology into the mourning and grieving process, allowing death to become part of broader rituals of life. By blogging about this broader trend, and creating historical connections, readers are better able to interpret behaviour despite the blog challenging their initial reaction.

Visualising the Dead

Museums and publications utilise a wide range of methods to visualise the dead, from artist's impressions of funeral scenes, to reconstructions of graves as they were once composed, to plans and photographs of mortuary remains in their context of discovery (Williams 2009; 2010). One key area of blogging is to augment and expand textual arguments with the use of images. This is enhanced by the ability to select from material available with Creative Commons licenses and from photographs taken by the blogger at a range of archaeological sites, mortuary monuments and cemeteries.

For recent memorials, there are issues regarding whether individual, named memorials should be reproduced. Some academic journals like *Mortality* have pursued a strategy of pixelating-out personal names upon memorials in photographs accompanying academic research (e.g. Parker and McVeigh 2013). As guest editor for that journal (Williams 2011), HW resisted this, accepting that some anonymity of the location is required and the depiction of full-names of the very-recently dead should be avoided unless absolutely necessary. In many blogs, one can find photographs of 19th- and 20th-century gravestones taken without full permission of living relatives and HW believes that to do otherwise is a poorly considered attempt to show 'respect' and thus thoughtless censorship, self-imposed or by publishers. In *Archaeodeath*, memorials situated in public places are regarded as intentionally for public viewing and hence it is legitimate to transcribe their texts and photograph them. This approach is taken in some archaeological publications (e.g. Corkill and Moore 2012). HW would argue that this is not ethically problematic. Memorials are by definition designed for audiences, often (but not always) placed intentionally to be read in publicly accessible and owned spaces. Indeed it is questionable to censor since it gives the impression that the personal name is somehow 'dirty' or 'tainted' whilst the memorial itself is less person and specific. Crucially, the name and material become disconnected, and the latter dehumanised, through censorship. Thus, writing about these memorials holistically - both text, material and context - with due respect and sensitivity as well as visualising them with care to their context of creation should not in itself

cause offence or require permission from relatives of the deceased. Indeed, depicting the memorial practices from the human past – distant or recent – is itself a form of respectful honouring of both past lives and past deaths. What possible 'disrespect' is afforded to reproduce images of (for example) war graves or gardens of remembrance that are already fully accessible to the public?

Still, it is recognised that perceptions of a public space can be seen as simultaneously public by many and private by their creators. Hence, where possible, the precise location and details of full personal names should be omitted where not necessary. For example, the park bench with a memorial plaque and recently scattered ashes is simultaneously a public and private space. In order to communicate my argument regarding commemoration in contemporary British society, in "Gazing through the Lens [cclxxi]" HW incorporated two photographs, one of the front of a memorialised new bench in an anonymised Welsh country park, another of the ashes of the loved one scattered behind the bench. HW also transcribed the memorial to 'dearest Len' and commented on the memorial in what HW regards as a sensitive and respectful fashion without intruding on private property. Since a full name is not recorded, affording anonymity in this instance is not an issue.

For older remains, and for human remains in particular, the question comes: what is the function of the blog as a medium for visualising death; are some images too shocking and disturbing to reproduce? Notwithstanding the fact that blogs almost always utilise images and materials already in the public domain, we need to justify how and why they are being used, rather than deploy images simply to attract the eye or to make gratuitous statements about the suffering of past individuals from particular diseases affecting bone or the fate of particular dead persons. An example from blogging, for *Bones Don't Lie,* is the absence of modern imagery from many posts despite its potential relevance. In "New Morbid Terminology: Coffin Birth" [cclxxii], imagery for the past is in general lacking, while modern forensics imagery is more common. Despite that, it was determined by KM not to include modern imagery as it was too gratuitous and could be emotionally damaging. Conversely, humour has been used in visual imagery to lighten death, such as the comic-like format of the *Horrible Histories* by Terry Deary and Martin

Brown (1993), which portray scenes of death and violence in a light-hearted format. As discussed previously, humour in some situations can lessen the discomfort of discussing death, but must be used carefully.

Imagery of the deceased should be used to augment and educate, not to shock. Moreover, if the images are publicly accessible via other existing media, the question comes as to whether the blog is making them more or less shocking by carefully incorporating them within a new and considered context. There is also future potential to employ the use of art and digital imagery in innovative ways to articulate concepts and ideas about mortuary archaeology afresh, something advocated for archaeological publishing but also pertinent to blogging about archaeology and death (Perry 2009; Williams 2009; 2010; Giles forthcoming). The use of alternative forms of imagery, such as art, drawn comics or cartoons, could also aid in engaging alternative audiences, or perhaps convey messages in a different way than more traditional forms of photograph and video. Archaeological illustrator John Swogger (2012) has argued that comics are a two-dimensional form of artwork that have explanatory power, and can act as graphic reports of archaeological work.

Hence, in blogging death, a range of visual imagery should be carefully and cautiously encouraged to facilitate innovation in communicating death past and present, not quashed by false attempts to show 'respect' through censorship. Again, as Sayer (2010) argues, concealment like this is counter to a spirit of public research in which mortuary archaeology should embrace openness in order to drive new perspectives and debates.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, this article is the first attempt to tackle the complex issues affecting blogging in mortuary archaeology, although blogs in bioarchaeology and archaeology more generally have, on rare occasions, addressed some of the issues within their own pages (e.g. *Archaeodeath*'s "Blogging Ugly Death" [cclxxiii]; see also Meyers and Killgrove 2014). Unlike blogs on archaeology generally, or more specific

human remains-focused themes in bioarchaeology or forensic science, mortuary archaeology deals with a wide range of evidence and behaviour relating to the deceased and mourning community; offering unique insight on the perceptions and approaches to death in the past. Blogging offers an approachable and open medium for mortuary archaeologists to communicate complex and often difficult topics to a broad audience. However, as discussed above, because we are dealing with a topic that has ethical and emotional concerns, there must be a greater awareness when blogging about death as to the purpose of the writing and the goal. Indeed, we would argue that blogging in mortuary archaeology has the potential as a medium of driving new levels of openness in the recording and debating of our motives and choices regarding how to write and visualise death in archaeological theory and practice. Thus, as mortuary archaeology bloggers, we hope to challenge and educate our readers about death in the human past but also about the archaeological project and the archaeological imagination, developing new formats to disseminate and debate research into mortuary practice and commemoration in the human past. By using humour, creating connections with the present and carefully selecting illustrative imagery, we create a digital arena where death can be explored and discussed and in which mortuary archaeologists, as public intellectuals, can challenge and shape popular understandings of death past, present and future.

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to Doug Rocks-Macqueen, Sara Perry and Chris Webster for valuable comments on pre-publication drafts of this chapter.

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