

## Archaeodeath as digital public mortuary archaeology

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# Public Archaeology

## Arts of Engagement

edited by

Howard Williams

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**Access Archaeology**





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# Archaeodeath as Digital Public Mortuary Archaeology

Howard Williams

*Since 2013, I have been writing an academic WordPress weblog (blog) – Archaeodeath: The Archaeology and Heritage of Death & Memory. In earlier publications, I have published preliminary reflections on the benefits of Archaeodeath as ‘digital public mortuary archaeology’ (DPMA), considering how it affords a mode of open-access public dissemination of mortuary archaeology, and a venue for debating and critiquing the archaeology and heritage of death and memory (Meyers and Williams 2014; Williams and Atkin 2015). Building on these discussions, this chapter reviews five-and-a-half years of the Archaeodeath blogging to the end of 2018, presenting the character of the blog’s content and its reception, identifying challenges and limitations of the medium, and (equally significantly in understanding its utility) considering key decisions regarding how I choose not to deploy this blog. I identify Archaeodeath as more than outreach or engagement, but as a digital platform increasingly both integral to, and transforming, my academic teaching and research practice.*

## Introduction

In the context of Western modernity’s simultaneous fascination with mortality but disengagement from the physical and corporeal traces of the dead, archaeologists increasingly operate as death-dealers (Meyers and Williams 2014; Giles and Williams 2016; see now Büster *et al.* 2018). Mediating and evaluating archaeology’s dialogues with death and the dead, ‘public mortuary archaeology’ extends beyond the ethics of mortuary dimensions to fieldwork, heritage sites, and educational environments and publications (reviewed by Giles and Williams 2016); it also relates to a host of digital engagements and interactions with the archaeological dead across a range of virtual environments, many accessed via the Internet (Williams and Atkin 2015; Sayer and Walter 2016; Nicholson 2018; Williams 2018; 2019a). As part of a spectrum of means by which mortuary archaeology is disseminated and transformed in the digital age, blogging not only offers a textually versatile and image-rich interpretative medium for constructing knowledge about the dead exhibited in archaeological remains (from early prehistory to the contemporary past), but it also promotes key themes in human mortality – dying, death, the dead and commemoration – in archaeological research to wide audiences. Furthermore, blogs offer a flexible medium for in-depth critical evaluations of heritage conservation, management and interpretation for mortuary remains, as well as an environment for candid and robust critiques of political and cultural uses and abuses of mortuary archaeology (Meyers and Killgrove 2014; Meyers and Williams 2014; Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015). This chapter reviews my own blog – *Archaeodeath: The Archaeology and Heritage of Death & Memory* – as a case study in digital public mortuary archaeology.<sup>1</sup>

## Blogging and mortuary archaeology

Blogging is not a new phenomenon: for over two decades archaeologists have been using online environments to create diaries and journals. Mortuary archaeologists and bioarchaeologists have thus gradually embraced the medium (Caraher and Reinhard 2015; Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015; e.g. Hoole 2016). Archaeology blogs with funerary dimensions have been widely used by commercial organisations, academic and other educational institutions, research projects, collaborations and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/>. Given the volume of posts, I cannot cite each individually, but direct readers to the website itself, from whence they can search the blog via tags. Occasionally below I cite web-links via footnotes to the tags to facilitate reader viewing.

networks, as well as serving as platforms for personal digital ‘diaries’ of academics and researchers.<sup>2</sup> Within this diverse range of uses, blogs operate alongside and within other web services (Caraher and Reinhard 2015), some focusing on different periods and places, and varied archaeological theories and methods, and they might include a host of interdisciplinary connections (Austin 2014; Hardy 2014: 104). Blogs have been particularly valuable as public-facing creations driven by researchers themselves, as opposed to most other media which rely on non-archaeological professionals to fashion our stories (such as television documentaries or news outlets). As such, they serve in disseminating and debating archaeological research activities, including those relating to mortuary archaeology and the archaeology of memory, without the restrictions of paywalls and printed components, or indeed mediation by journalists and television producers (Morgan and Eve 2012; Austin 2014; Webster 2014; Morgan and Winters 2015; Perry 2015). Likewise, blogs foster experimentation and innovation in new themes and subjects of archaeological and interdisciplinary enquiry, as well as providing a space for writing about death for both academics and non-professionals (e.g. Whitaker 2014; see also Kirk 2016).<sup>3</sup>

Archaeological blogging harbours the potential to escape from the restrictions of traditional academic publishing formats and structures, not only in being open access to all, and readily discovered via a Google search or via social media, but including interactive, multi-vocal and nonlinear formats (Perry 2015; Caraher and Reinhard 2015). This has a particular appeal for mortuary archaeology, where dialogue with stakeholders and descendant communities is particularly important (e.g. Cook 2018). Further beneficial dimensions include the potential rapidity and frequency of publishing; freedom is afforded from the traditional constraints of formal academic citation systems and peer-review, whilst blogs can readily and effectively draw on a wide range of web-based sources of evidence (Caraher and Reinhard 2015). Importantly, blogs reach fresh and diverse audiences, and are written in different styles and formats, engaging those who might not read academic books and guidebooks. The geographical scope of any individual blog is potentially global. The often provisional, personal, and sometimes cursory nature of blog-posts should be celebrated, not denigrated, as integral to the medium. Yet there is equally no *a priori* reason why archaeological blog-writing cannot be as nuanced, rigorous and reach the same heights of scholarly originality and rigour as other media of published research (Whitaker 2014: 219). Indeed, blogs might readily be the first place where new ideas are aired ahead of more formal publication.

The visually rich nature of blogging is of particular advantage for many archaeological subjects, including those tackling human remains and mortuary environments. Freed from the restrictions on image quality, character and costs associated with traditional publishing venues, blogs can be striking and varied in their interpretative uses of visual media. Disseminated via social media (notably Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), blogs comprising of text and images (and sometimes videos) can both communicate and innovate academic research with fresh ideas and approaches, of interest both to colleagues and to those who otherwise have no knowledge or appreciation of archaeology or heritage (see Meyers and Williams 2014; Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015).

There is also the issue of *who* is blogging about mortuary archaeology and bioarchaeology: it has afforded avenues for students and early-career scholars, and potentially also amateurs and enthusiasts, with an outlet alongside more traditional venues for promoting their research (Meyers Emery and

<sup>2</sup> Doug’s Archaeology lists (to 2016) 902 archaeology blogs: <https://dougsarchaeology.wordpress.com/archaeology-blogs/>. Notably few focus on mortuary archaeology, although a handful do explore bioarchaeology, and others tackle mortuary themes for particular periods and places.

<sup>3</sup> <https://dougsarchaeology.wordpress.com/archaeology-blogs/>

Killgrove 2015). This relates to how blogging can offer a voice to those who might otherwise not be heard regarding archaeology and heritage debates, thus disrupting traditional academic hierarchies. Blogging, furthermore, allows scholars to be proactive (promoting research) and reactive (critiquing popular receptions of research) as public intellectuals (Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015; for context, see Tarlow and Nilsson Stutz 2013). For example, the critical collective reaction to the television show *Nazi War Diggers* (in which human remains were discovered and poorly handled) offers an example of how social media and blogging rapidly articulated a robust and critical stance from the archaeological community (e.g. Hardy 2014).

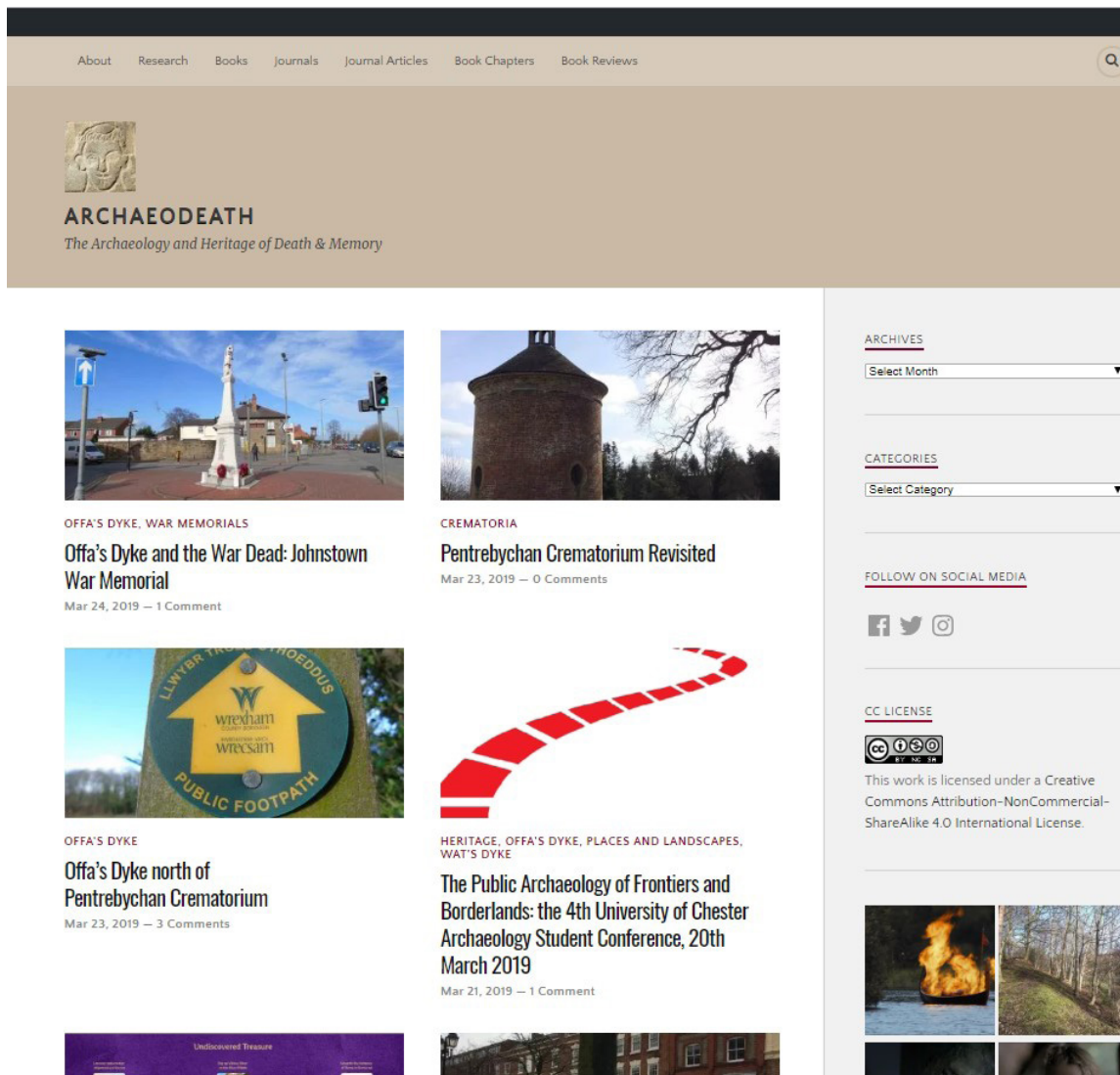


Figure 1: Screen-shot of the *Archaeodeath* homepage, 3 April 2019

Blogs have further value for disseminating mortuary archaeological subjects, and a range of mortuary archaeologists and bioarchaeologists have increasingly deployed this medium (Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015; Williams and Atkin 2015). The venue affords transparency and clarity to a subject which is often shrouded in mystique and regular accusations of specialist concealment of practice and interpretations (Morgan and Eve 2012; Sayer 2010). Blogs thus allow mortuary archaeologists and bioarchaeologists to operate as educators and enablers to students and the public (Meyers and Killgrove 2014), and sometimes also as lobbyists and public critics of the uses and misuses of mortuary

data (Meyers and Killgrove 2014; Meyers and Williams 2014: 162–163). Mortuary archaeologists can thus join a wider range of online environments for engaging people in mortuary remains and debating death-positive themes (see Myers and Williams 2014: 163; Ulguim 2018).

Certainly, not everyone blogs and there remains inertia and resistance among many to blogging about mortuary topics in particular. Caution over digital engagement can occur for a number of intersecting reasons, including academic pride and conservatism, ethical sensitivities of the material itself and its digital dissemination (Bodies and Academia 2016; Finn 2018; Williams 2018; Williams and Atkin 2015), and necessary and justifiable concerns regarding the need to respect local communities and descendant groups (see Caraher and Reinhard 2015). Blogging and other modes of digital engagement also remains rarely recognised, supported and rewarded within academic and professional spheres. Furthermore, blogging might be regarded by some as subverting the traditional process of knowledge dissemination following rigorous peer-review and without full verification and support of arguments and interpretations (Caraher and Reinhard 2015; Meyers and Williams 2014: 164).

To date, however, there have been few discussions of mortuary archaeology's specific use of blogging as a medium for outreach and debate (Killgrove 2014; Meyers and Killgrove 2014; Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015; Meyers and Williams 2014). Meyers and Williams (2014) identify key challenges for blogging about mortuary matters: combatting sensationalism; offering candid (sometimes humorous) rather than euphemistic writing; employing analogies between past and present sensitively and carefully when addressing mortuary themes; and being able to afford historical perspectives on contemporary phenomenon (Meyers and Williams 2014: 163–170). The ethics of the visualisation of mortuary contexts were also a challenge (Meyers and Williams 2014: 170–172; see also Bodies and Academia 2016; Finn 2018; Giles 2016), including the particular hegemony of skeletons and cadavers in DPMA and the challenge of retaining contextual information when disseminating images of mortuary subjects which, on the Internet, have often been detached from their physical and historical context (Williams and Atkin 2015). Further challenges for DPMA via blogging and other media include the powerful but problematic popular fascination with named historical personages, the relatively cautious and limited museum and commercial engagement with digital media (see also Webster 2014), and the valorisation of discovery over analysis and interpretation (Williams and Atkin 2015).

There remain further difficulties with evaluating the impact of blogging on mortuary archaeological subjects. A critical issue in blogging about archaeological subjects is that they receive relatively limited audiences (Caraher and Reinhard 2015; Hardy 2014). Moreover, blogs' ramifications for scholarly enquiry and public engagement are often asserted rather than evaluated in detail (Perry *et al.* 2015; Walker 2014). This relates to a collective failure by archaeologists to critically interrogate blogging beyond the positive role it can play in terms of outreach and sharing, including the negative, challenging and limitations of digital engagement (Perry 2015; Perry *et al.* 2015). Among the challenges, blogging may actually enhance disciplinary disparities in status and power (Perry and Beale 2015; Walker 2014), as well as potentially increase the risk of personal abuse and harassment directed at authors, many of whom may be in precarious job situations and/or may suffer from mental health issues as a result (Perry *et al.* 2015). Rather than fostering the de-centring and empowering 'techno-utopian' transformations in archaeological research and its public engagement (see Walker 2014), blogging and other social media engagements should not be considered as positive and impactful by default.

However, while I would concede the scarcity of rigorous evaluations of blogging impact, equally the evidence and arguments for the limitations and challenges with blogging remain just as unquantified and unqualified (Perry 2015; Walker 2014). In addition, there is nothing *specific* about these critiques to blogging about mortuary archaeology, and limited consideration has been given in critiques to mortuary archaeology blogging. Furthermore, the issue remains that if archaeologists dealing with death collectively retract engagement with social media and blog platforms, it will concede cyberspace completely to fringe and pseudoarchaeological discourses, from misuses of DNA results and the

promotion of fantastical accounts of ancient ‘races’ and cultures, to the sale of human remains and other cultural artefacts (Booth 2018; Huffer and Graham 2017; Williams 2018: 3–4). Even if our audiences are limited and our posts infrequent, the ability to present an authoritative, reliable and/or critical voice on public receptions of mortuary archaeology constitutes one way by which academics can operate as public intellectuals (Tarlow and Nilsson Stutz 2013). Finally, there are some striking success stories in mortuary archaeological blogging that defy academic criticisms, like those reviewed by Perry (2015). Notably, US bioarchaeologist Dr Kristina Killgrove’s blog-posts for Forbes regularly receive four, five and six-figure hits, making some degree of wider social impact for her academic evaluations of new discoveries and analyses of popular misconceptions of mortuary and bioarchaeological research beyond contention.<sup>4</sup> Even if most archaeologists are not reaching such a high-profile by blogging, the digital environment retains the potential of reaching new and different audiences, both immediately, and through the enduring legacy of digital media down the years.

### **Introducing *Archaeodeath***

Inspired by other blogging academic archaeologists (see Meyers and Williams 2014), in the summer of 2013 I started the WordPress blog *Archaeodeath*, initially simply as an experiment in digital public mortuary archaeology (Figure 1).<sup>5</sup> I rapidly adopted it as a regular and integral component of my research endeavours as an academic archaeologist, focusing on my field visits, research activities, and opinion pieces (‘archaeorants’) about archaeological research by others and media and popular culture receptions of archaeology. I have regularly cross-referenced *Archaeodeath* posts with the Project Eliseg<sup>6</sup> and the Offa’s Dyke Collaboratory project websites.<sup>7</sup> *Archaeodeath* is covered by a Creative Commons license which permits the sharing of the material for non-commercial purposes with a suitable attribution.

This review attempts to evaluate *Archaeodeath*. In doing so, I concede that it might fall into the category of what Perry (2015) regards as ‘superficial’ and ‘slapdash’ scholarship on archaeological blogging, but I do at least attempt to delve into key aspects of the blogging experience in relation to my broader research in medieval and modern deathways and mnemonic practices. Moreover, it does constitute a longitudinal study over five-and-a-half years, thus affording a sense of how medium-term digital engagement can create an accumulated resource beyond the reach of each individual blog-post. As a proactive and reactive context for digital public mortuary archaeology (see Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015), *Archaeodeath* can be regarded as taking risks and challenging the parameters and foci of mortuary archaeology in a fashion Perry (2015) advocates blogs should aspire to do.

### **The frequency, content and character of *Archaeodeath***

In addition to top-header static pages introducing me and my published research, *Archaeodeath* is a constantly shifting composition of individual blog-posts connected by geographical, chronological and theoretical themes linked to my academic research, specifically focusing on the archaeology and heritage of death and memory. Since I started blogging in June 2013, *Archaeodeath* has generally resulted in between 10 and 20 posts per month, totalling 1,143 posts to the end of 2018. My approach is therefore one of rapid and regular public dissemination of ideas and observations, averaging roughly every two days, but sometimes in short bursts of 2–3 per day interspersed by modest hiatuses for some weeks (Figures 2–3). The frequency and timing of posting is largely happenstance, depending on my other commitments. Posts comprise of text of varying length from several hundred to several thousand words, and vary in style from journalistic and informal reviews to more academic evaluations and discussions.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kristinakilgrove/#34d4d33416da>

<sup>5</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2013/11/26/why-did-i-start-a-blog/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://projecteliseg.wordpress.com/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://offaswatsdyke.wordpress.com/>

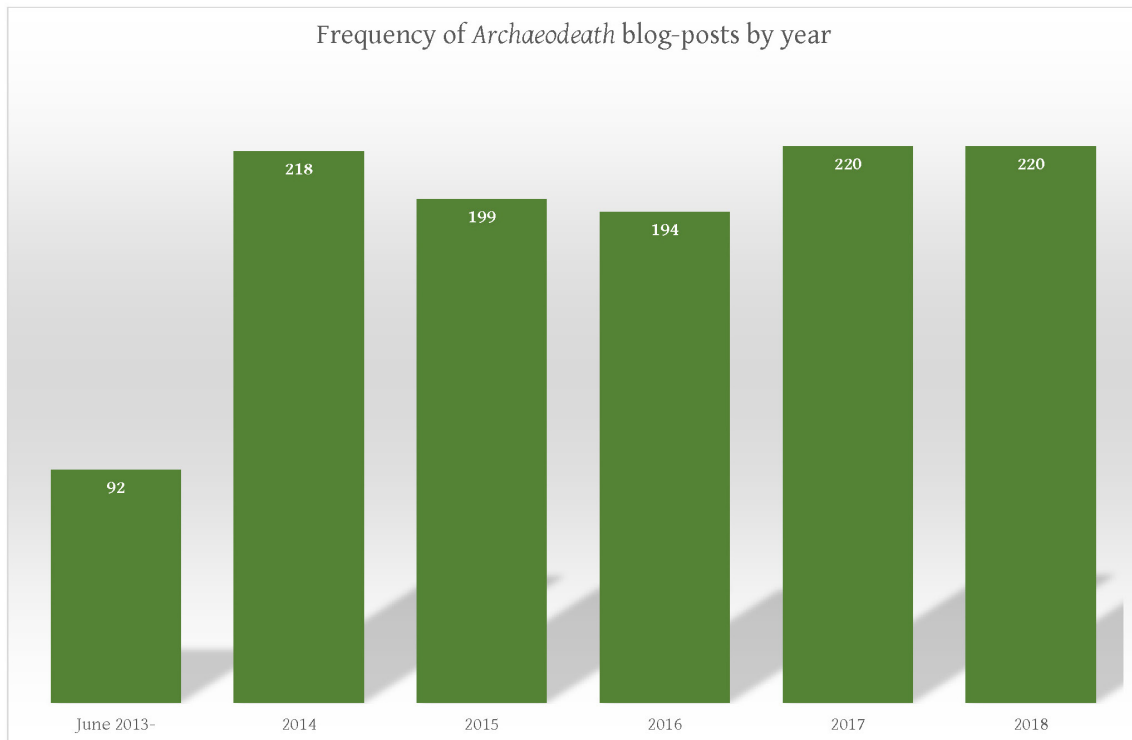


Figure 2: Frequency of *Archaeodeath* blog-posts by year

The posts are composed to be stimulating and engaging for different levels of readership (see Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015). I try to make memorable, amusing and/or querying titles (sometimes including puns) to offer stand-alone statements to be read in combination with the featured image. Indeed, the text is often (but not always) arranged with the presumption that most readers will only glance at the title and/or Introduction and/or Concluding sections. The aim is for the reader to be able to follow-up on the blog to other sources of information, so I try to include hyper-text links to key websites and open-access publications. Sometimes, I augment with academic references to specific publications deployed in the writing of the piece. Equally, I try to make connections to previous posts, and use the ‘Categories’ and ‘Tags’ to foster linkages to thematic strands. Indeed, for those simply reading further than the blog-post’s title (including seeing it on social media with its single front image), most posts offer multiple images, sometimes as few as 1–2 photographs, but many with up to 20+ images. Sometimes I will use other publicly available images. However, mostly I deploy my own from visits to sites, monuments and landscapes, where appropriate, thus affording a visually rich and detailed exploration of (mainly) UK mortuary and monumental environments from prehistory to the present. Indeed, images are central to the blog format I have pursued: only very rarely are my posts image-free and this occurs where a place-specific or theme-specific image will only distract from the argument or discussion, or when images might be ethically problematic. For those opening most posts, I try to ensure that images (sometimes but not always captioned) provide a visual journey around the environment under discussion. I have deployed an android camera phone, an iPhone, a digital bridge camera, or else a digital SLR camera, and I reduce the resolution of the images in Adobe Photoshop to allow the viewer to apprehend far beyond the standard and stock-perspectives afforded by many official and touristic gazes on monuments, buildings and landscapes. As such, many posts can be appreciated as a gallery of images with or without a careful reading of the accompanying text, and thus while I write only in UK English, the blog is accessible to non-English readers.

The popularity of the blog has risen steadily during this period with 412,554 hits recorded to date (2 April 2019) (Figure 4). Overall this is relatively small for a website compared with the level of views received were I to write pieces for (by way of example) *The Conversation*. Still, it constitutes a regular flow of 8,000-10,000 views per month and 2019 has risen over the 2017 and 2018 figures for total numbers of hits.

The blog-posts encapsulate a wide range of subjects (Figure 5), from records of public talks, research seminars, research workshops, conference papers and conference sessions and conferences organised, to reviews of my own fieldwork and publications. Beyond my research engagement and outputs, I have on occasion addressed pedagogic issues relating to mortuary archaeology and the archaeology of memory, including reporting on field trips with my undergraduate and postgraduate students.

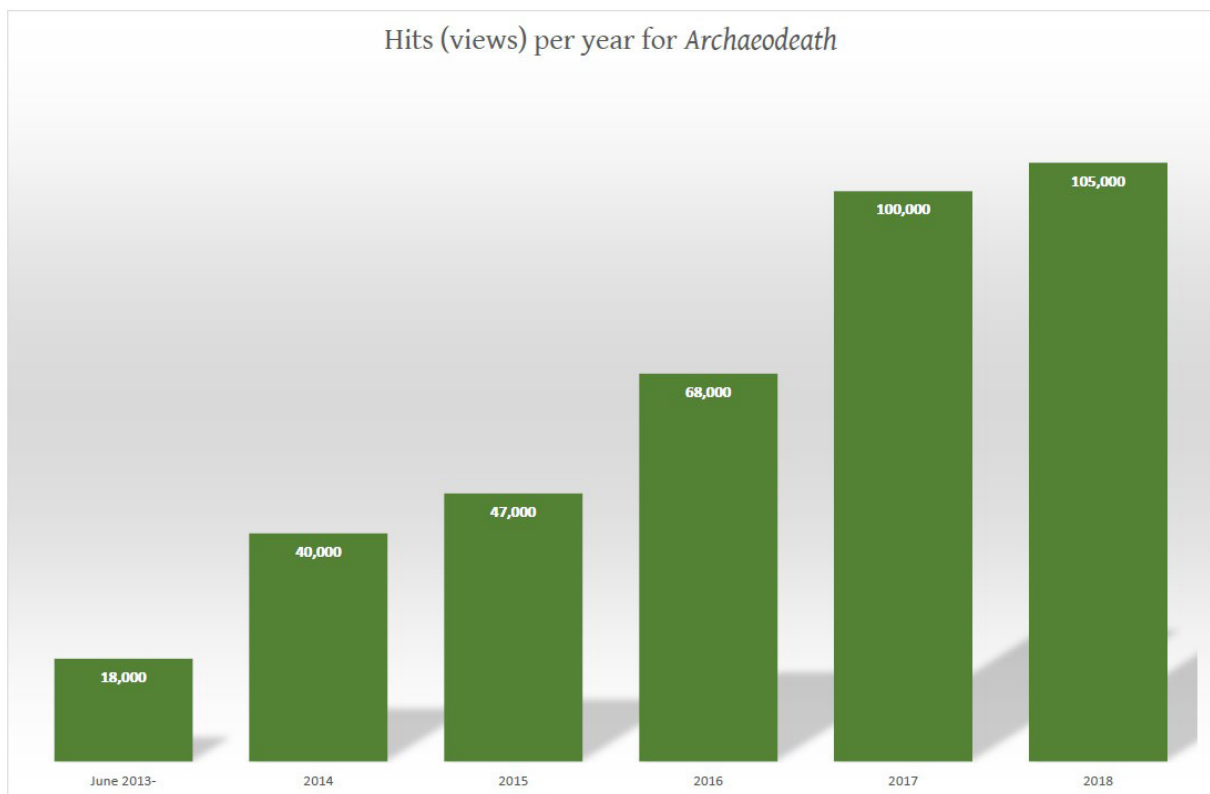


Figure 3: Archaeodeath blog-post numbers per week (varying from 0 to 10) over a six-month period from October 2018 to April 2019

The blog thus contains many posts reporting field visits to a wide range of heritage sites, monuments and landscapes both during my research and free time. In doing so, *Archaeodeath* comments on memorial and mortuary dimensions, as well as heritage themes, in discussing a wide range of site-types, from Neolithic chambered tombs and Bronze Age burial mounds to medieval monastic ruins, castles, medieval and post-medieval church and churchyard monuments; the material cultures, monuments and landscapes of garden cemeteries (19<sup>th</sup> century to present). The blog also critiques heritage sites and museum displays involving mortuary remains.

One key way in which the blog takes on less-charted mortuary archaeology territories is via the ‘contemporary past’, including 20<sup>th</sup>-/21<sup>st</sup>-century war memorials and other forms of conflict commemoration and public art. *Archaeodeath* has also explored the archaeology and heritage of a disparate range of present-day memorial practices and monuments, addressing themes as wide-ranging as crematoria, gardens of remembrance, woodland cemeteries, roadside memorials and ash-scattering

sites, love-locks, #metoo heritage, football memorials, Stolpersteine and the heritage dimensions of Brexit.

My growing interests in non-mortuary monuments have been represented too, including the linear earthworks of the Anglo-Welsh borderlands and elsewhere: notably Offa's Dyke and Wat's Dyke. This links closely to my work with the aforementioned Offa's Dyke Collaboratory, where themes of memory and memorialisation remain important.

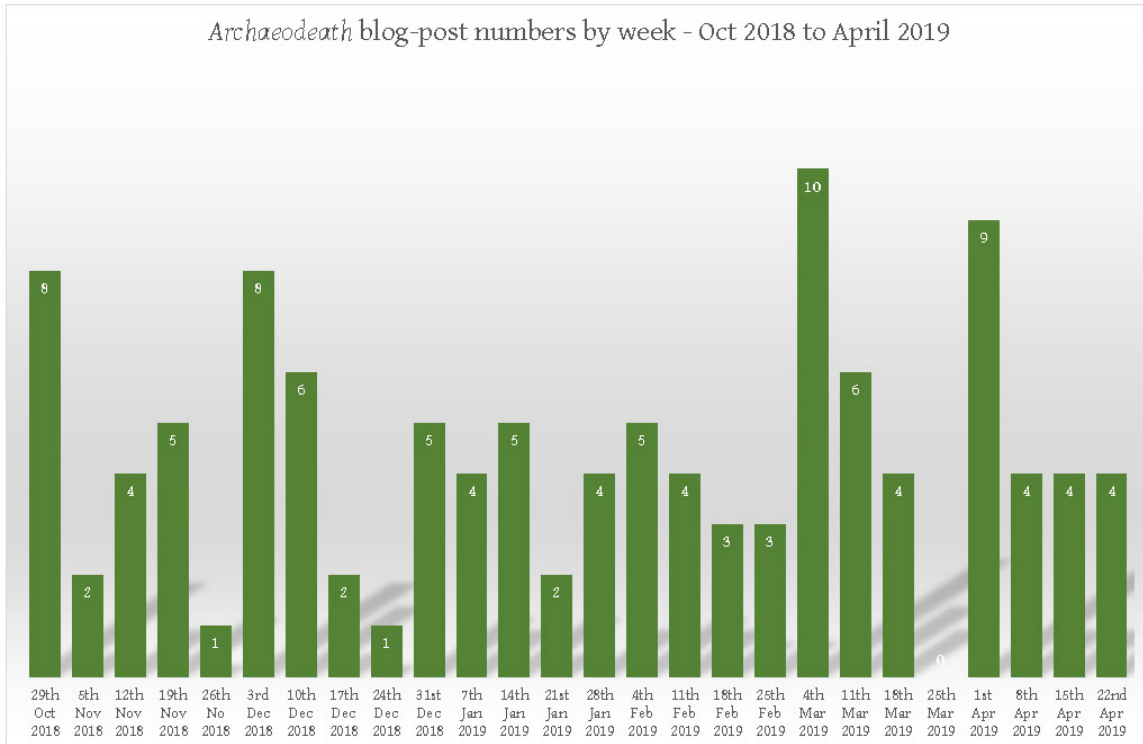


Figure 4: Hits (views) per year for *Archaeodeath*, rounded to the nearest thousand

### The growing readership of *Archaeodeath*

As mentioned above, the blog is (at the time of writing, April 2019) followed on WordPress itself by 758 people. In addition, search engines (mainly Google) are the principal way people find the blog, while many are referred to the blog from my dissemination by Facebook (my personal profile until August 2018 and subsequently by a dedicated page, now with 447 likes) and Twitter (via my Twitter handle @howardmrw, currently with over 4,000 followers). I have also unsuccessfully attempted to disseminate the blog via G+ (shut down from April 2019) and Tumblr. The 2018 top-ten of audiences are (in descending order) UK, USA, Canada, Australia, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, Ireland, France and Poland. In previous years, Norway, Italy, Spain and Finland have also made single appearances in the annual top-ten of countries that most view *Archaeodeath*.

As is true with most blogs, comments on *Archaeodeath* or direct responses via social media are relatively rare (see also Caraher and Reinhard 2015). Most blog-posts receive only tens to a few hundred views, and therefore are clearly of interest to only a niche audience of followers. However, each year there have been blog-posts that have received many hundreds, even thousands, of views. These more popular posts tend to feature topics of broader appeal across the archaeological community and beyond, particularly when they relate to evaluations of archaeology on film and television, or else comments



A more detailed consideration of the most-viewed posts each year is instructive, although many of my more rigorous and academic blog-posts have not made the top-ten for any given year. Moreover, posts nearer the end of the year will have their viewing figures divided across multiple years, so the ‘top-ten’ is only a crude indication of the more popular posts. Still, in the first six months of blogging, my ‘top-ten’ individual blog-posts (excluding the well-visited Home Page/Archives, the ‘About’ page and the very popular introductory blog) already showed the ability of this medium to reach a far wider audience than any public talk or peer-reviewed journal article I have ever worked on.

## 2013

In this first six months of blogging, it is evident that the most popular blog was one that courted controversy in its title and popular subject matter among academics: criticising the popular appeal of the widely lauded project to locate, excavate and analyse the grave of King Richard III of England (1) (Table 1). The attention afforded to the Dylan post has already been addressed and is misleading (2). These were followed by a range of posts about site visits (3, 4, 5, 10), updates on my early medieval archaeological research and public talks (7, 8, 9: see Austin 2014) and also my critical discussion of UK academia’s Research Excellence Framework process (6).

Table 1: Top-ten Archaeodeath posts from the start of the blog in June 2013 to the end of that year

Ranking (views)	Post-date	Title	Views
1	28/09/2013	What is truly wrong about digging up Richard III	2,037
2	28/09/2013	Bob Dylan and the bizarre etiquette of academic invitations and requests	1,113
3	07/07/2013	Erddig iron	344
4	05/07/2013	Chirk Castle gone to the dogs	259
5	28/06/2013	Archaeology of the Welsh deserted medieval settlement – Hen Caerwys	222
6	04/09/2013	Archaeology REF	217
7	13/10/2013	Burials of the slain, killing at the funeral, killing the dead: violent Viking funerals	203
8	23/07/2013	Early medieval stone monuments: materiality, biography, landscape	184
9	14/07/2013	Why decorate early Anglo-Saxon pots?	172
10	14/07/2013	In the Welsh landscape with Katy the bone-blog legend	167

## 2014

The top-ten from my first full year of blogging reveals an overall increase in the views for the most popular posts (Table 2). Beyond welcoming and showcasing the result of a newly appointed colleague (Dr Caroline Pudney: 6), and reporting on a Departmental research seminar (by Dr Melanie Giles: 10), popular posts considered further heritage sites (3). Moreover, there were two popular posts about Offa’s Dyke: one criticising the destruction of a section near Chirk (2), another discussing the preliminary radiocarbon dates released by CPAT’s follow-up investigations (8). Linked to my then-project on cathedral tombs, my post on medieval and modern effigy tombs proved very popular (4). Also notable is the continued appearance of the introductory post and 4 further posts from the preceding year (2013: 1, 5, 7, 9). These examples indicate that, once posted, posts might endure and continue to circulate and be

consulted on social media, which counters the perception that such posts are ephemeral in the digital arena. Indeed, the Richard III post (1) received over twice as many hits in 2014 as it had in 2013 when first posted.

Table 2: Top-ten Archaeodeath posts from the first full-year of blogging in 2014

Ranking (views)	Post-date	Title	Views
1	28/09/2013	What is truly wrong about digging up Richard III	4,665
2	03/06/2014	Roll up, roll up, take a free slice of Offa's Dyke	530
3	24/11/2014	A bishop's castle, Llawhaden	525
4	30/07/2014	Speaking with effigy tombs	456
5	14/07/2013	Why decorate early Anglo-Saxon pots?	369
6	07/07/2014	Welcome Dr Caroline Pudney	314
7	13/10/2013	Burials of the slain, killing at the funeral, killing the dead: violent Viking funerals	314
8	07/04/2014	An Offa that can be refused? Mercia's past of might and memory	278
9	16/10/2013	Tombs of Vikings? Hogback stones revisited	277
10	13/02/2014	Death and violence in the Iron Age	253

Table 3: Top-ten Archaeodeath posts from the second full-year of blogging in 2015

Ranking (views)	Post-date	Title	Views
1	05/02/2015	<i>Vikings</i> Seasons 1 and 2 – an <i>Archaeodeath</i> review	1,452
2	14/11/2015	The largest ancient mound in Wales: the Gop Cairn	792
3	09/08/2015	Asperger, heritage and archaeodeath	716
4	20/08/2015	Who kills archaeologists?	670
5	18/12/2015	Vertical death: the coffin the wall at St John's Chester	613
6	27/12/2015	We are Seven	549
7	22/11/2015	Paths of the dead: the ghosts of medieval battle	505
8	12/10/2015	The 'Sutton Hoo Treasure' must be destroyed!	501
9	14/02/2015	The plague of terms: the 'Anglo-Saxon's	493
10	12/12/2015	Landscapes of the dead: exploring Anglo-Saxon mortuary geographies	418

## 2015

For 2015, the second full year, there is a significant rise in views for the top-ten, and notably all were new posts within the calendar year (Table 3). Popular posts described site visits to prominent ancient monuments (2 and 7), but also posts about new publications (10). There are also new areas of

discussions: museum displays (8), debating broader challenges of archaeological terminology (9), but also discussions of 19<sup>th</sup>-century funerary monuments and their folklore (5 and 6). Two other notable areas of investigation were included: the most popular post was an evaluation of the first two seasons of the History Channel series *Vikings* from an archaeological perspective, part of my increasing attention to popular perceptions of mortuary archaeology in contemporary society (1). Meanwhile, I chose to write about the ISIS public execution of Palmyra's lead archaeologist (4). Most personal, and pushing the parameters of the blog further still, I wrote a post about the challenges I face visiting heritage sites with my daughter who had been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (3). In summary, 2015 saw a consolidation and multi-directional expansion of the blog's parameters and foci beyond site-visits, research updates and the occasional 'archaeorant'.

## 2016

This third full-year of blogging saw for the first time multiple blog-posts receive over one thousand views, and the overall popularity of the blog continued to grow (Table 4). The most popular topic took the form of a response to a news story that a local history group had been denied permission to photograph gravestones in Birmingham: I reflected on the ethics of photographing memorials to the dead. Next, I composed a discussion piece about Donald Trump's election as US president as a means of critiquing social approaches in mortuary archaeology that presume the deceased's identity is reflected in their burial treatment (2). Heritage issues were a further concern in critiquing the decision of English Heritage to carve the face of Merlin into the living rock by Merlin's Cave at Tintagel (3) and one of a series of blog-posts following this up by evaluating the media and social media furore surrounding the heritage interpretation of the 'Dark Age' phase of the site (6). Next came two posts published in 2015 and appearing in that year's top-ten: showing once again the enduring appeal of some topics, namely critiques of museum classifications and popular cultural uses of the word 'treasure' (5) and my aforementioned review of Seasons 1 and 2 of *Vikings* (4), in this year joined by a review of the mortuary practices presented in the show's Season 1 (7). A further reflection on mortuary archaeological themes linking my research on cremation practices to contemporary science fiction formed the focus of one post on *Star Wars* (8). The last two topics took the blog into fresh territory again: reporting on the (re)discovery of a later medieval fragment of effigial slab, arguably from Valle Crucis Abbey (9) and a response to a *Daily Mail* news story denouncing a colleague at UCL for deploying trigger warnings for his module on contemporary archaeology (10). Again, controversial topics attracted most hits, and those where analogies and synergies exist between mortuary archaeology and contemporary society, politics, and entertainment have proved most popular.

## 2017

The ever-increasing popularity of the blog overall took the majority of the top-ten to over 1,000 views each for the first time (Table 5). The Donald Trump mortuary archaeology post endured in popularity from late 2016 and became the most-reviewed post of 2017 (1). The grave-photograph post also demonstrated an endured popularity through 2017 (4). The reviews of the TV show *Vikings* have also persisted, as the show has continued to be aired with new seasons appearing throughout the time period (6, 9). My review of Season 1 of the Norwegian comedy and part-parody of *Vikings* – *Norsemen* – proved to be equally popular with readers (7). Again, controversial topics attracted considerable attention, with my response to the social media furore by alt-right commentators over the BBC's representation of ethnic diversity in Roman Britain receiving many hits, where I argued it reveals the centrality of artistic impressions in the communication of archaeological knowledge (3). A dominant and new feature of *Archaeodeath* in 2017 was three of my multiple-post response to the widely disseminated and debated publication of the Birka female warrior chamber grave Bj581 (Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017; see now also Price *et al.* 2019). This was a rare instance where I chose to use my blog to critically evaluate both a new academic publication and its media and popular reception (2, 5, 10).

Table 4: Top-ten Archaeodeath posts from the third full-year of blogging in 2016

Ranking (views)	Post-date	Title	Views
1	31/01/2016	What's wrong with photographing the dead	3,551
2	10/11/2016	Archaeologists agree that most medieval tombs were built for complete a***holes	1,656
3	15/02/2016	Putting Merlin to death? Tintagel, art and the death of imagination	1,629
4	05/02/2015	<i>Vikings</i> Seasons 1 and 2 – an <i>Archaeodeath</i> review	1,212
5	12/10/2015	The 'Sutton Hoo Treasure' must be destroyed!	1,116
6	26/06/2016	The Dark Ages at Tintagel	877
7	09/02/2015	<i>Vikings</i> – an <i>Archaeodeath</i> review of death in Season 1	782
8	30/12/2015	Darth Vader's mask strikes back: Star Wars crematifacts explored	773
9	31/03/2016	The smiling abbot of Valle Crucis: an <i>Archaeodeath</i> exclusive	702
10	25/09/2016	Cosseted students are scared of the dead? Disturbing mortuary archaeology	682

Table 5: Top-ten Archaeodeath posts from the fourth full-year of blogging in 2017

Ranking (views)	Post-date	Title	Views
1	10/11/2016	Archaeologists agree that most medieval tombs were built for complete a***holes	3,706
2	14/09/2017	Viking warrior women: an <i>Archaeodeath</i> response part 1	3,278
3	04/08/2017	Ethnic diversity in Roman Britain: it all kicks off with images	2,041
4	31/01/2016	What's wrong with photographing the dead	1,200
5	15/09/2017	Viking warrior women: an <i>Archaeodeath</i> response part 2	1,127
6	09/02/2015	<i>Vikings</i> – an <i>Archaeodeath</i> review of death in Season 1	1,073
7	17/09/2017	The archaeology of Norsemen	1,042
8	07/09/2017	The 'Digging into the Dark Ages' conference	890
9	05/02/2015	<i>Vikings</i> Seasons 1 and 2 – an <i>Archaeodeath</i> review	816
10	20/09/2017	Viking warrior women: an <i>Archaeodeath</i> response part 4	795

## 2018

The popularity of *Archaeodeath* was maintained during 2018, but not significantly improved in overall viewing figures from 2017 (Figure 4). By way of comparison, if over 200 views allowed a post to reach the top-ten for 2013, then a full 69 posts received over 200 views in 2018 (Table 6). In short, the effectiveness of *Archaeodeath* cannot be evaluated solely in terms of hits for any single post soon after its publication, but the overall diversity of themes and issues addressed across multiple posts and multiple years. Another notable feature was the predominance of posts published in previous years,

with only 2 new blog-posts making the top-ten (1, 10). Both relate to reports on local sites visited: one a detailed photographic review of the medieval monuments in Gresford church (1), another visiting the significant archaeological excavations of Offa's Dyke at Chirk Castle by Clwyd-Powys Archaeological Trust (10). Two further posts illustrate my ongoing posts about contemporary archaeologies of death and memory (7, 9): one a disaster memorial on the Isle of Man (7), one the grave of a late 20<sup>th</sup>-century comedian (9). New posts are receiving steady traffic, but perhaps it reflects the maturity of the blog, and the year-on-year popularity of reviews of television dramas, that older posts are still attracting continued attention. Strikingly, a total of five posts in the top-ten relate to my reviews of mortuary archaeology in television: three in the series *Vikings* (2, 5, 6), joined by examples of my season-by-season reviews of the funerary scenes, graves, cemeteries and mortuary monuments depicted in *The Walking Dead* (4) and *Game of Thrones* (3).

While it is too early to evaluate *Archaeodeath* for 2019 at the time of writing, a review of preliminary statistics show that the most-viewed posts relate to controversial topics and my mortuary archaeological reviews of television shows: dramas and documentaries. Notably, given the run-up to the final season of *Game of Thrones* airing in the spring of 2019, my most-viewed post of 2019 to April has been my 2016 post about cremation practices in the third season of the show. This post has already received more views in 2019 than previous years, thus illustrating the enduring appeal of certain posts that coincide with broader popular culture trends.<sup>9</sup>

Table 6: Top-ten Archaeodeath posts from the fifth full-year of blogging in 2018

Ranking (views)	Post-date	Title	Views
1	04/03/2018	Gresford's medieval monuments	4,230
2	05/06/2017	Helga's funeral in <i>Vikings</i> season 4 part 2	1,588
3	21/05/2016	Fire on the Water: Cremation in <i>Game of Thrones</i> Season 3	1,570
4	25/02/2017	"Liar", "Rapist", "Murderer" and "Rich Bitch" – naming and displaying corpses in <i>The Walking Dead</i> Season 4	1,427
5	05/02/2015	<i>Vikings</i> Seasons 1 and 2 – an <i>Archaeodeath</i> review	1,337
6	09/02/2015	<i>Vikings</i> – an <i>Archaeodeath</i> review of death in Season 1	1,323
7	02/05/2016	Death, fire and forgetting	1,076
8	14/09/2017	Viking warrior women: an <i>Archaeodeath</i> response part 1	892
9	18/12/2016	"Remembered With a Laugh" The Grave of Sir Norman Wisdom OBE	878
10	29/09/2018	The mother of all ditches! Offa's Dyke at Chirk Castle	760

<sup>9</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2016/05/21/fire-on-the-water-cremation-in-game-of-thrones-season-3/>

### ***Archaeodeath* research transformations**

So far, I have made the argument that *Archaeodeath* has increasingly diversified its scope to encapsulate mortuary matters relating to museums, heritage sites, historic landscapes, media mortuary archaeology, and popular culture receptions, as well as discussions and evaluations prehistoric, ancient, medieval and modern mortuary practices, monuments and landscapes. In addition, I have identified how controversial and challenging synergies between past and present foster most interest among readers of *Archaeodeath*. Yet there are further points I wish to make regarding how the blog has begun to transform how my academic research, and thus forming part of a continuum, rather than a class, of academic writing (Caraher and Reinhard 2015; Perry 2015).

### ***Original essays in DPMA***

First, I want to identify some posts that serve as reactive to new publications, and critiques of their public reception. Most recently these include a series of posts about Viking warrior women, but also about the episodes of the television documentary *Legends of the Lost with Megan Fox* featuring Viking warrior women and Stonehenge. For each, I composed my own reviews.<sup>10</sup> In addition, in subsequent blogs, I critiqued other archaeological reviewers' appraisals of the show, suggesting that while there were indeed overt fringe elements that deserved robust archaeological criticisms, the critical focus upon the celebrity presenter and claims she was driving an exclusively pseudoarchaeological agenda are problematic.<sup>11</sup> I argued that these shows deployed cutting edge mainstream archaeological research, including features by talented younger scholars, and that the Viking warrior women episode had been directly inspired by the aforementioned 2017 *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* article (Hedenstierna-Jonson *et al.* 2017). These posts demonstrate my independent critical voice both on public receptions of mortuary archaeological research, and their detractors.

Another area where I have deployed the blog in fashions beyond my traditional academic writing is in promoting new critical commentaries of contemporary commemorative practice. For example, among my reviews of conflict and disaster memorials,<sup>12</sup> I have critically commented on aspects of the centenary celebrations of the First World War. In particular, I focused my critical attention upon silhouettes,<sup>13</sup> as well as poppy and other floral gigantisms,<sup>14</sup> and the deployment of militaria<sup>15</sup> appended to existing war memorials. I have also reflected on the controversial topic regarding when some war memorials might now, with the benefit of hindsight, be regarded as problematically patriotic, even 'gammon' (overtly jingoistic) in their texts and sculpture.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/01/01/fox-rocks-a-review-of-legends-of-the-lost-with-megan-fox-viking-warrior-women-an-archaeodeath-response-part-7/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/01/04/foxhenge-a-review-of-legends-of-the-lost-with-megan-fox-episode-2stonehenge-the-healing-stones/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/01/02/reviewing-the-archaeology-reviews-of-legends-of-the-lost-with-megan-fox-viking-warrior-women-an-archaeodeath-response-part-8/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/01/05/reviewing-the-archaeology-reviews-of-legends-of-the-lost-with-megan-fox-stonehenge-the-healing-stones/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/category/archaeologies-of-death-and-memory/war-memorials-archaeologies-of-death-and-memory/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/03/09/silent-silhouettes-there-but-not-there/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/20/rhosllanerchrugog-war-memorial/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/26/metallic-poppy-gigantism/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2014/08/24/first-world-war-anniversary-church-shrines/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/02/we-need-to-talk-about-the-gammon-dimensions-of-first-world-war-memorials/>. For definitions of 'gammon' in current parlance, see Somerlad 2018.

### Notes towards academic publication

While the blog has hosted posts that constitute original academic essays that operate as stand-alone interpretations in mortuary archaeology and public mortuary archaeology, *Archaeodeath* also contains ‘notes’ towards academic publications (see also Caraher and Reinhard 2015). As such, writing them has allowed me to experiment, garner feedback, and to grow a sense of confidence in addressing new and different themes through to publication. Let me select two examples to illustrate this point.

My expertise lies in early medieval archaeology, but I have increasingly posted on later medieval and early modern funerary monuments, including those surviving in churchyards,<sup>17</sup> within historic churches,<sup>18</sup> and those in display at ruined monasteries and thus integral parts of heritage sites,<sup>19</sup> and those in museums<sup>20</sup> and art galleries.<sup>21</sup> In many instances, while my photographs remain amateur, they are a vast improvement on other images available online. Likewise, my reviews of these monuments identify new features and parallels hitherto not published. Thus they arguably constitute original contributions to research, albeit outside of the traditions of academic peer-review.<sup>22</sup> As shown above, in 2016 I was party to the rediscovery of a long-lost fragment of a very-late 13<sup>th</sup>-century/early 14<sup>th</sup>-century abbatial effigial grave-slab, arguably derived from the Cistercian monastery of Valle Crucis, near Llangollen, Denbighshire.<sup>23</sup> Having been shown the grave-slab upon visiting Llangollen Museum, where it was on temporary display, I decided to compose an *Archaeodeath* post to promote the museum, encourage people to visit and view the monument, but also in the hope of garnering feedback from both experts and amateur enthusiasts who might help to identify parallels from across Britain and beyond (Figure 6). Indeed, the sustained positive feedback and guidance received from both experts and the wider public via the blog inspired me to develop my posts into an original research article in collaboration with Gillian Smith and David Crane of Llangollen Museum and archaeologist and artist Aaron Watson. I charted the journey from discovery to publication through a series of blog-posts in which I reported on interim stages of research on the ‘Smiling Abbot’. This project developed through to publication in a peer-reviewed venue – the *Archaeological Journal* – in under 2 years (Williams *et al.* 2018).

Likewise noted above, I have used *Archaeodeath* from 2015 to write critical evaluations of mortuary archaeology’s influence and explicit use within television dramas, particularly the first four seasons of the historical drama *Vikings*, but also *Deadwood*, *Game of Thrones*, *Marco Polo*, *Norsemen*, *Peaky Blinders*, *Star Trek: Enterprise*, *The Last Kingdom*, and *The Walking Dead*, as well as a series of films. For *Vikings*, I have evaluated the many different representations of death, burials and funerary and commemorative practices in the show, including the uses of material cultures, mortuary monuments and landscapes, as part of the storyline.<sup>24</sup> As seen above, my evaluation of the funerals in Season 1, and a detailed discussion of the grave-goods deployed in the funeral of Helga in Season 4 part 2, have been most frequently

<sup>17</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/01/20/sex-sin-and-skeletons-on-a-tomb-chest-at-plemstall-cheshire/>

<sup>18</sup> Examples include my posts on funerary sculpture in St Mary’s and St Beuno’s church, Whitford, Flintshire (<https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/15/whitfords-late-medieval-funerary-monuments/>) and St Mary’s church, Cilcain, Flintshire (<https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/05/an-assemblage-of-medieval-funerary-fragments-cilcain/>).

<sup>19</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/05/absent-bodies-and-brass-archaeodeath-at-fountains-abbey/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/06/24/archaeodeath-at-tintern-abbey/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/06/19/a-tintern-abbot/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/10/31/10-deathly-things-i-liked-most-about-the-dead-normal-exhibition/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/11/11/memento-mori-tombs-and-memorials-in-cheshire-explored/>

<sup>22</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/category/archaeologies-of-death-and-memory/church-monuments/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2016/03/31/the-smiling-abbot-of-valle-crucis-an-archaeodeath-exclusive/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/category/death-on-tv-and-film/vikings/>

viewed. The use of cremation practices in the show has been a particular focus of attention, linked to my early medieval research (Figure 7).

The cumulative confidence and the positive feedback received from these blog-posts inspired me to edit, enhance and revise these posts, using them as ‘notes’ from which to develop an original book chapter reviewing and evaluating funerals in the show for seasons 1–4 (Williams 2019b). This in turn has inspired further academic writing: with reviews of the show’s representation of the treatment of human remains beyond the funeral, and appraisals of the show’s portrayal of assembly places, both in the publication pipeline. Likewise, I aspire to write up my evaluations of death, memory and material culture in seasons 5 and 6 of *Vikings*, and perhaps to extend my evaluations of media mortuary archaeology to other shows, including *The Walking Dead* graphic novels and television series.

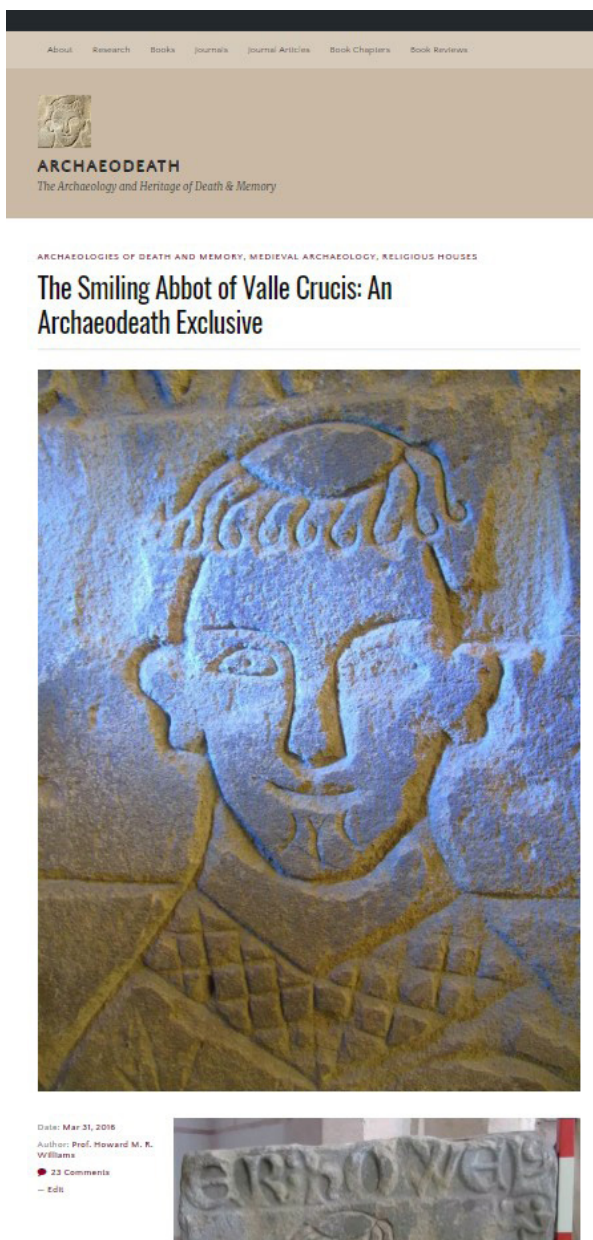


Figure 6: Screen-shot from the initial ‘exclusive’ report on the ‘Smiling Abbot’ effigial grave-slab from March 2016

VIKINGS

## Cremating the War Dead in Vikings Season 4 part 1



Date: Apr 26, 2018

Author: Prof. Howard M. R. Williams

0 Comments

— Edit

I confess I have missed out a key funeral scene in my review of *Vikings* Seasons 1–4! I jumped to discussing *Vikings* Season 5's funerals without mentioning the cremation of the war dead during the second attack of the Northmen on Paris.

Previously in *Vikings*, we've been shown individual cremation in Scandinavia and mass-cremations during raiding in England, both taking place over water. Aslaug is also burned over water. The show has also depicted mass-cremations on the beach at Kattegat. But a different permutation of landscape, context and cremation takes place in Episode 7 of Season 4 part 1. The war dead are cremated on land, beside the River Seine, following the campaign to tackle Rollo's river defences.



Figure 7: Screen-shot from one of my Vikings blog-posts from April 2018

In terms of DPMA, these examples illustrate the importance of Perry's (2015) argument about regarding digital engagement as part of a continuum of scholarly practices. In this instance, *Archaeodeath* has enhanced and extended my academic writing into new territories, in cases operating as original essays in their own right, or as part of series of posts on a similar theme. In further instances they have come to serve as formative stages of interpretation en route to peer-reviewed outputs. The two examples discussed here are valuable in showing how the blog operates in this regard both for my interpretations of past funerary monuments as well as evaluations of mortuary archaeology in contemporary society.

### **Discussion: what *Archaeodeath* is not**

This chapter has so far reviewed the frequency, character, content and quantitative reception of *Archaeodeath*, and made the case that the blog has incorporated original research essays and notes towards publication. While the blog has developed in significant fashions over its five-and-a-half year history, I have made some strategic decisions regarding what I have *not* done on the blog that are as important as what I have chosen to do. Reviewing these decisions further serves to self-evaluate the character and focus of the academic practice of blogging.

#### ***Modest hits and limited comments***

*Archaeodeath* clearly reaches more people, and arguably different audiences in geographical, social and cultural terms, than any real-world public lecture or other activity I have attempted. In this regard, it is an astounding success. Equally though, it is not a massive hit in comparison to the wider blogosphere, let alone the relatively modest attention compared with micro-blogging via Twitter or posting comments on Facebook or Instagram. The relatively low-level of views can be compared with blogs posted by colleagues on media sites like *Forbes* or *The Conversation*. However, in retaining my blog on my own, free WordPress blog, I have retained editorial control and the ability to augment, update, revise or retract posts at my discretion (although to date I have never done the latter). Therefore, in defining this as a form of public engagement and public intellectual endeavour, I have (with notable exceptions) self-imposed restrictions. As noted above, there are limitations in the restricted number of comments, so there is little dynamism: like many blogs, *Archaeodeath* is largely about broadcasting rather than dialogue (see also Caraher and Reinhard 2015).

#### ***No to co-production***

One of the repeatedly cited advantages of archaeological blogging is the prospect of collaboration and co-production (e.g. Perry 2015). However, I have chosen not to experiment at all with co-production, whether in terms of multiple or guest authors by academics and other researchers, or from the public. This limitation has stifled many possible uses of the blog, yet it has allowed me to retain independent authorship and sole responsibility for its content. The blog thus operates as a solo venture with the attendant advantage of not imposing upon, or exploiting, the intellectual efforts and labour of others in its production (see Perry *et al.* 2015 and Richardson 2018 for the ethics of unpaid/volunteer labour in digital archaeology). This is in contrast to so much academic publishing in general, which takes place at the expense of the often-unpaid labour as peer-reviewers, authors and co-editors, or in terms of fieldwork, often uncredited labour and interpretations.

Regarding the labour and intellectual input on myself, this is an aspect of my academic role for public engagement and research impact, even if it is afforded no specific time allocation and institutional credit. For this reason, I write my blog as an academic and identify my title and academic affiliation, but I do so without a formal connection to my University (cf. Perry and Beale 2005: 158).

#### ***No to political neutrality***

Despite assertions by some commentators to the contrary, all archaeological practices are enmeshed in contemporary politics in varying degrees and intensities. While I resist voicing opinions on a raft of social and political issues, the blog refuses to adopt a politically neutral stance. I make clear some of my political views especially when they directly intersect with my academic research. For topics relating to the archaeology and heritage of death and memory, I have been overtly critical of political

violence against heritage assets and professionals,<sup>25</sup> heritage crime,<sup>26</sup> including damage to scheduled monuments, the commodification of past material culture as ‘treasure’,<sup>27</sup> companies irresponsibly promoting metal-detecting and looting,<sup>28</sup> and the sale of human remains (Williams and Atkin 2015; see also Huffer and Graham 2017).<sup>29</sup> More broadly, I have posted multiple times about the heritage of Brexit<sup>30</sup> and the patriotism and nostalgia of heritage narratives,<sup>31</sup> particularly via commentaries on mortuary archaeology news stories which have prompted angry reactions from the far-right.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, I’ve reflected on the Trump presidency’s policies relating to the US/Mexican border from an archaeological perspective.<sup>33</sup> By actively critiquing the commodification of human remains and mortuary contexts in multiple posts, I have aimed at promoting a respect and an appreciation for human remains, and mortuary contexts and environments and in some small fashion promote awareness of their mobilisation in political discourse.

### ***Limited archaeological pedagogy via blogging***

Only occasionally have I used my blog as a focus of pedagogic debate; this is an area for further potential (Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015). Still, using blogs to teach has become a minor dimension of *Archaeodeath* relating to both reviews of sites, monuments and landscapes visited with undergraduate and postgraduate level students, and as an element of my guiding of final-year single honours undergraduate students working towards organising and promoting a public archaeology day conference. There is clear potential for further pedagogic debates regarding mortuary archaeology using blogging as a forum (see Killgrove 2014). However, wishing to respect the anonymity of colleagues and students, and because I am not well-versed in pedagogic theory, I have refrained from developing these dimensions.

### ***Curtailed critique of just-published research***

I have previously expressed the aspiration of extending my voice as a public academic through blogging,<sup>34</sup> despite the need to resist becoming a mortuary archaeological rentamouth: dishing out judgements on every subject. However, I have refused to deploy my blog to regularly offer commentaries and judgements on just-published academic research (reviewing journal articles, book chapters, edited collections or monographs), with the exception of the ‘viral’ Viking warrior women research (see above). The reason for this is to avoid my blog serving as an immediate ‘book review’, passing judgement on scholarship in my field and thus becoming an abusive exercise in academic power relationships, especially in the event that the research involves the ideas and endeavours of students and early-career researchers. Similarly, although I have critiqued television programmes, museum exhibitions and heritage sites, I

<sup>25</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2015/08/20/who-kills-archaeologists/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2014/06/03/roll-up-roll-up-take-a-free-slice-of-offas-dyke/>

<sup>27</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2015/10/12/the-sutton-hoo-treasure-must-be-destroyed/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/03/17/cadburygate-the-freddo-fiasco/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/02/09/selling-dead-bodies-and-mortuary-artefacts-in-the-uk-today-welbeck-hill/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/03/13/brexit-the-eu-flag-and-commemorating-victims-of-terrorism/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2017/05/07/brexit-archaeology-and-heritage-reflections-and-agendas-at-ucl/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2017/03/29/brexit-and-archaeodeath/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/07/08/footballs-coming-home-the-repatriation-of-the-game/>

<sup>32</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/02/27/cheddar-man/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2016/11/14/the-trump-wall-in-archaeological-perspective/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/03/02/trump-claims-medieval-walls-worked-they-absolutely-did/>

<sup>34</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2014/03/29/blogging-archaeology-where-are-we-going-with-blogging/>

have avoided writing evaluations of the merits and validity of new archaeological field-/lab-/library-based research (with a few notable exceptions). The principal exception has been my response to the aforementioned Viking warrior-woman story, where my commentaries on the interpretative problems with the research were but one element of a series of posts focusing primarily on the broader public, media and academic receptions of the open-access peer-reviewed publication (Hedenstierna-Jonson 2017; see now also Price *et al.* 2019). In future, I may revisit this stance, but for the moment I usually delay, or withhold, specific critical evaluations on singular research outputs on *Archaeodeath*.

### **‘No yet’ to video blogs**

Despite aspirations to the contrary,<sup>35</sup> I have yet to extend my *Archaeodeath* blog into video-blogging (vlogging) (see Tong *et al.* 2015). This remains a key gap for future development, although it requires technical expertise and further time to invest in this format that I do not currently possess (Meyers Emery and Killgrove 2015).

### **Conclusions**

It is clear that the merits and challenges of archaeological blogging about mortuary and memorial subjects need to be evaluated in a more critical, systematic and comparative fashion. In this review of only one blog, this cannot be achieved. Still, I have identified the versatility and efficacy of *Archaeodeath* as a case study in DPMA, and suggested how, linked to micro-blogging on social media, and to academic publications, blogs like *Archaeodeath* can persist and develop as rich, robust and sustainable dimensions of digital public mortuary archaeological practice. Operating as public engagement and fora for evaluations of public mortuary archaeology, *Archaeodeath* has proved effective in multiple regards.

First, *Archaeodeath* currently has no close ‘rivals’ in the ‘blogosphere’: while some individual projects and blogs address relevant connected themes, perhaps only *Bodies and Academia*,<sup>36</sup> *These Bones of Mine*,<sup>37</sup> and *Powered by Osteons*<sup>38</sup> are extant and overlapping in their themes with dimensions of *Archaeodeath*. Sadly, two exceptionally valuable death-focused archaeology blogs by former postgraduate students are no longer running.<sup>39</sup> Thus, *Archaeodeath* has no comparable blogs addressing the archaeology and heritage of death and memory.

Furthermore, *Archaeodeath* has demonstrably reached larger and more diverse audiences than any series of public lectures or public-facing activities a single academic might hope to deliver. This is evidenced by the volume and temporal duration of new hits the blog has received, as well as the geographical spread and varied interests of readers). An additional index of success is that *Archaeodeath* has fostered conversations and actions by heritage bodies and researchers. For example, the National Trust properties at Chirk and Erddig gained impetus from my critical blog-posts to foster new initiatives to promote understanding and appreciation of Offa’s Dyke and Wat’s Dyke running through the parkland of each historic property respectively.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, my posts evaluating Seasons 1–4 of *Vikings* identified the lack of funerary monuments and cemetery evolution as a limitation of the show’s portrayal of death rituals (Williams 2018); whether by coincidence or response, this has been partially remedied in portrayals of Viking funerary monuments in England and Iceland in season 5 of the show (e.g. Figure 8).

<sup>35</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2014/03/29/blogging-archaeology-where-are-we-going-with-blogging/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://bodiesandacademia.wordpress.com/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://thesebonesofmine.com/>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.poweredbyosteons.org/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://bonesdontlie.wordpress.com/>; <https://deathsplaining.wordpress.com/>

<sup>40</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2016/10/17/dyke-denial-at-chirk-castle/>; <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2016/10/26/more-dyke-confusion-wats-dyke-at-erddig/>

VIKINGS

## Iceland's First Grave: Vikings Season 5 part 1



Date: Mar 11, 2018

Author: Prof. Howard M. R. Williams

0 Comments

— Edit

Season 5 part 1 of *Vikings* opens with a [boat-inhumation](#), and so it closes. In doing so, it returns to Season 1 and Season 4 part 1, in which boat-shaped graves are portrayed, rather than the deployment of boats themselves in mortuary contexts.

The back story: Floki leaves the Great Army in England to 'give himself to the sea' but then he discovers Iceland (as one does). He has visions of the pagan gods as he explores and comes to believe the land is sacred to them. He is then inspired to return to Kattegat to evangelise his discovery and encourage true-minded 'believers' to accompany him to Iceland. The settlement of Iceland is thus portrayed as some bid for pagan purity in response to the feuding of Scandinavia and the 'infection' from Christian ways.

He leaves with Lagertha's blessing with Aud the Deep-Minded and Ketil Flatnose with his own craft and two further ship-loads of followers. He wants to create a perfect community free with principles of equality and harmony, free from any violence (apart from animal sacrifices, of course). However, he has lied to the community about the wealth and benevolence of the land, and discord unfolds. A temple to Thor is built by Floki and his followers yet some in the group object to the temple and the tax they must pay to maintain it. The temple is burned and the

Figure 8: A blog-entry evaluating early medieval funerals as depicted in Vikings Season 5 part 1

Over the last 2 years I have started to receive invitations to speak at multiple workshops and conferences based on topics I have researched and blogged about, but I have yet to publish via peer-reviewed academic venues. For example, in the last 12 months I have spoken in public lectures, conferences and interdisciplinary workshops regarding Viking mortuary practices, including 'warrior women', in response to the success of my evaluation of the Bj581 grave's interpretation and both media and popular reception.<sup>41</sup> Hence, *Archaeodeath* is positively affecting how my ideas and research are being received within interdisciplinary academic debates as much as it is extending beyond the academy.

<sup>41</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2018/08/25/code-narrative-history-archaeogenetics-at-sigtuna/>

These positive points are underpinned by a May 2019 *Archaeodeath* survey on Crowdsignal, the results of which are evaluated on the blog itself.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, blogging has enhanced and transformed my academic writing, assisted by self-imposed limitations in its scope and foci which afford a degree of individual authorship and control over content. In the future, however, the platform offers the potential to change and develop my academic research and teaching practice to include collaborations, co-production, video media and perhaps also more robust critiques of new scholarship and its popular reception and political uses and abuses. Whether it involves *Archaeodeath*, the future of public mortuary archaeology is set to include many more digital dimensions. Blogging is currently set to remain and develop as an important part of this portfolio of digital engagement and research for the archaeological investigation of death, memory and material culture.

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<sup>42</sup> <https://howardwilliamsblog.wordpress.com/2019/06/05/the-a%CA%80%E1%B4%84%CA%9C%E1%B4%80%E1%B4%87%E1%B4%8F%F0%9D%96%89%F0%9D%96%8A%F0%9D%96%86%F0%9D%96%99%F0%9D%96%8D-survey-results/>

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