

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH AND BURIAL

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LEARNING FROM THE DEAD

Somewhere along the banks of the River Volga in Russia there is a large earthen mound underneath which are the burnt remains of a cremation funeral conducted over a thousand years ago. Although this mound has never been identified, we know of its existence thanks to a startling account of how it came to be built. We might question the reliability of aspects of this ancient story but it illustrates something of the richness and extraordinariness of those lived experiences which normally survive for archaeologists only as decayed bones, scraps and soil. Out of these unpromising materials we attempt to recover lost lives from the distant past.

THE FUNERAL OF A VIKING

Between AD 921 and 922 Ibn Fadlan was secretary of an embassy from the Kalif of Baghdad to the people of the middle Volga.¹ At the trading post of Bulgar he met people known as the Rus – Scandinavian merchants and military venturers living in Russia – and wrote a remarkable account of the funeral of one of their ‘outstanding men’. The mourners placed the corpse in a wooden chamber for ten days while they cut and sewed garments for him. The man’s wealth was divided into three: one part for his daughters and wives; one for garments to clothe the corpse; and the third for making *nabid*, an intoxicating drink, which the mourners consumed over the ten days in an orgy of drunkenness and sexual activity. His slave girls were asked who wished to die with him; one volunteered to be burned with him. ‘[I]n these ten days [she] drinks and indulges in pleasure; she decks her head and her person with all sorts of ornaments and fine dress and so arrayed gives herself to the men.’

On the day of the cremation, Ibn Fadlan went down to the river and saw that the man’s longship had been brought ashore and placed on a scaffold supported by four wooden posts. A wooden canopy was put up in the middle of the ship and decked with fabrics. In the ship an old woman, called the Angel of Death, covered a couch with a mattress of Greek brocade. ‘[I]t is she who has charge of the clothes-making and arranging all things, and it is she who kills the girl slave. I saw that she was a strapping old woman, fat and louring.’ The man’s corpse was taken out of its temporary grave; it did not smell bad but ‘had grown black from the cold of the country’. He was still wearing the clothes in which he had died and in the grave had been placed *nabid*, fruit and a pandora (a stringed musical instrument) which were all removed.

The corpse was reclothed in trousers, stockings, boots, a tunic, a kaftan of brocade with gold buttons, and a hat of brocade and fur. He was seated on the mattress and propped up with cushions, surrounded by *nabid*, fruit and fragrant plants; bread, meat and onions were placed before him. Many people gathered around, playing musical instruments. The

dead man's kinsmen erected tents at a distance from the ship. The girl slave went to these tents to have sexual intercourse with each of the kinsmen, who announced in a loud voice, 'Tell your master that I have done the duty of love and friendship.' Animals were sacrificed and placed in the ship: a dog was cut in two, two horses were hacked into pieces with a sword, two cows were similarly cut up and a rooster and a hen were also killed and thrown in. The decapitated rooster was thrown, head and body, to the right and left of the ship. The man's weapons were placed by his side.

On the final afternoon the slave girl was led to a structure resembling a door frame. Standing on the palms of the men, she was lifted three times to overlook the frame. Ibn Fadlan asked the interpreter what she had said when looking over the frame. The first time she said 'Behold, I see my father and mother'; the second time 'I see all my dead relatives seated'; the third time 'I see my master seated in Paradise and Paradise is green; with him are men and boy servants. He calls me. Take me to him.' A hen was brought and she cut off the head, which she threw away while its body was put in the ship. She was then taken to the ship where she took off her two bracelets and gave them to the Angel of Death, and took off her two finger-rings and gave them to the Angel of Death's two daughters who had been waiting on her for the last ten days.

Then men came with shields and sticks. She was given a cup of *nabid*; she sang at taking it and drank. The interpreter told me that she in this fashion bade farewell to all her girl companions. Then she was given another cup; she took it and sang for a long time while the old woman incited her to drink up and go into the pavilion where her master lay . . . [T]he old woman seized her head and made her enter the pavilion and entered with her. Thereupon the men began to strike with the sticks on the shields so that her cries could not be heard and the other slave-girls would not be frightened and seek to escape death with their masters. Then six men went into the pavilion and had intercourse with the girl. Then they laid her at the side of her master; two held her feet and two her hands; the old woman known as the Angel of Death re-entered and looped a cord around her neck and gave the crossed ends to the two men for them to pull. Then she approached her with a broad-bladed dagger, which she plunged between her ribs repeatedly, and the men strangled her with the cord until she was dead.

The closest relative of the dead man then took a piece of wood, lit it and, completely naked, walked backwards towards the boat, facing the crowd, holding the stick in one hand and using his other hand to cover his anus. The people each took a piece of tinder or firewood for him to light, which he then placed in the wood pile beneath the ship. The flames grew and engulfed the pyre and the ship. One of the Rus turned to the interpreter and said 'You Arabs are fools . . . You take the people who are most dear to you and you put them in the ground where insects and worms devour them. We burn him in a moment so that he enters paradise at once.'

[A]n hour had not passed before the ship, the wood, the girl, and her master were nothing but cinders and ashes. Then they constructed in the place where had been the ship which they had drawn up out of the river something like a small round hill, in the middle of which they erected a great post of birch wood, on which they wrote the name of the man and the name of the Rus king and they departed.

One day we may be able to locate the actual mound and compare its contents with Ibn Fadlan's account. From the archaeologists' point of view it is a great shame that the ship was burnt. Had the ship been buried under the mound rather than incinerated, we might have a treasure house of information which could tell us much to complement the story and add to what was known by Ibn Fadlan. We would be able to study the construction of the boat, the life histories and possibly the genetic ancestries of the man and the slave, the full range, character and origin of the non-perishable grave goods, the local environment of the funeral and the quality of the sacrificed animals. Even with the cremated remains, a certain amount could be learned from the burnt bones and surviving artefacts, such as the age and sex of the deceased, the use of a boat and the provision in the ship of certain things such as the man's weapons. There are aspects of role and activity which the archaeological remains will never shed light upon, such as the part played by the Angel of Death or the size and duration of the funeral ceremonies.

HUMAN REMAINS: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH OR THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF LIFE?

It is a strange paradox that the physical remains of the dead – the bones and any surviving tissues, hair, skin and so on – are most likely to reveal information about the life of an individual and not about their death. Bones and tissue provide a testament to people's past lives: how long they lived, what sex they were, what illnesses or diseases they suffered, how tall they grew, what genetic ancestry they had, what sorts of foods they ate, what injuries they sustained, how well built they were, and whether they were deliberately deformed, bound, tattooed, body-painted or scarified. Had the man and the slave girl been buried and not burnt, archaeologists might have learned more about their lives than Ibn Fadlan himself knew, such as their age, their injuries, pre-mortem state of health, their childhood growth, and whether the slave girl had ever had children.

This book is not so much about what can be learned from human skeletons concerning these issues of demography, diet, health and body modification *per se*, nor is it about the physical processes affecting human remains and their decay after their deposition.² Rather, it is about the archaeological study of the funerary practices that the living perform for the dead.³ It is not so much about the dead themselves as the living who buried them. The dead do not bury themselves but are treated and disposed of by the living. Archaeologists seek not only to document ancient rituals by recovering the evidence of past funerary practices but also attempt to understand them within their historical contexts and to explain why they were enacted in the ways that they were. For example, we might ask why the Rus thought the way they did about cremation and the afterlife, why they destroyed a valuable item like the ship, and why sacrifice of the slave girl was a necessary act. As archaeologists, one of the main ways in which we interpret past societies is through recovering the material traces of those practices associated with the remains of the dead.

The Iceman

A good example of what this book is not about is the 5,000-year-old body known as 'Ötzi' or the 'Iceman', which was found by chance in the Ötztaler Alps of the South Tyrol.⁴ All the evidence indicates that this man died while travelling in a high Alpine pass, a victim of the weather whose corpse was never retrieved. Funerary rites may have been performed for the absent body in the community from which he came, but there is nothing about the Iceman, his equipment or his circumstances which relates to the funerary

practices of the period. His equipment and clothing, along with his tattooed body, are part of a time capsule from which we can try and make sense of what an individual's life was like.

Yet the Iceman's body and belongings can offer indirect evidence that might help us to understand the funerary practices that were carried out at that time. We may compare his remains, lost in the mountains, with those from burials from the region in which he probably lived around 3300–2900 BC. This contextual approach then enables the archaeologist to find out what has been selected for or omitted from the burials, given that the Iceman helps us to know something about how the living dressed and equipped themselves. Although this comparison can only be partial for the time being, graves of this period have been found at Remedello near Brescia in northern Italy, about 150km away.

The non-perishable artefacts from one of the Remedello burials, Grave 102, consist of a copper axe, a flint dagger and four flint arrowheads: a very close match to some of the Iceman's equipment.⁵ Yet there were other durable items possessed by the Iceman which did not turn up in that burial: his drilled white marble bead, the multi-purpose flint scraper/blade, the small flint blade, the flint drill, the bone awl, the antler spike, the antler tip of the pressure flaking tool and the bundle of four antler fragments. In turn, the Iceman did not have the pots that are found in many of the Remedello burials as offerings or accompaniments for the deceased. Furthermore, the Iceman's dagger is smaller than the flint daggers in the Remedello cemetery and is most closely comparable to flint objects from Remedello identified as large arrowheads. The Iceman's dagger and arrowheads are also broken whereas those from Grave 102 are pristine, hinting that they were either not used much or were made specifically for the funeral.

Konrad Spindler considers that the man was dressed for the mountains, wearing items of clothing which he would not have worn at lower altitudes. He also speculates that the man's broken rib and his damaged and partial equipment, including his quiver of twelve untipped arrow-shafts and two arrows with damaged tips, may be evidence that the Iceman was fleeing from the scene of a violent conflict perhaps resulting from a harvest-time raid on his village. Whether or not Spindler is correct, his reconstruction of the man's last few days or hours helps us to understand that the funerary assemblages from cemeteries such as Remedello provide fixed representations of an individual's appearance and identity which were fluid and changing throughout his or her life.

This example of the Iceman gives us the way in to two sorts of representation. We know how he looked and how he presented himself, but we cannot compare him to how others presented themselves – his parents, his kin group and the people from the next valley for example. His funeral representation, had he been buried, would have told us about how others saw him as a corpse. Funerary practices serve to create an idealized representation – a 're-presenting' of the individual by others rather than by the man himself. We may all know of situations where viewing of a corpse has brought forth exclamations of how little the corpse resembles that person when alive, or conversely how closely it does. However, we could argue that the Iceman's own view of himself – what he wanted to wear, his tattoos, his equipment – is one version of reality, and the funerary treatment is another version of the same reality rather than an unreal, distorted, idealized and ritualized representation. Both representations – how he dressed in life and how his corpse, had it been retrieved, would have been dressed and equipped in death – are grounded in their own realities; it is just that the contexts are different.

INHUMATION

The term 'burial' is synonymous with the act of disposing of the corpse in western society, despite the fact that in some countries such as Britain cremation is the dominant rite. Archaeologists have often failed to remind themselves that burial ('inhumation' or 'interment') is simply one of the many means by which the dead are removed from the domain of the living or merely demarcated as dead. In fact archaeologists are able to locate only a small proportion of the total population likely to have lived in the past, given the numbers which can be calculated from settlement densities and other indicators of human presence. In two notable studies the total numbers of individuals whose bones were found in the communal Neolithic tombs and Bronze Age round barrows of Britain were calculated as deriving from populations far too small to have been demographically viable, thereby demonstrating that such monuments held only a small proportion of the Neolithic and Bronze Age dead.⁶ Most ancient funerary rites seem to be archaeologically invisible, leaving no direct material trace.

The act of burial provides archaeologists with a wide variety of potential information about past funerary practices and their social contexts. The provision of a final resting place for someone's mortal remains is generally a carefully thought through procedure which may have taken days, months or even years to plan and execute. Burial is thus a deeply significant act imbued with meaning. It represents one of the most formal and carefully prepared deposits that archaeologists encounter even though the actual ceremony at the time may have been noisy, chaotic and disputed – we should not expect past cultures to have always buried their dead with the sombre *gravitas* that is so characteristic of most western funerals. The drinking, casual sex, playing of music and banging of sticks on shields at the Rus funeral are not unique; such behaviour would not be out of place in the funerary rites of many cultures around the world today.

The grave

The shape and depth of a grave may relate to the social status or gender of the person buried. It may also reflect the degree of formality in the burial rite. The hole or pit may serve not just as a repository for the corpse but its shape and dimensions may be constructed so that it echoes other contexts. There are many ethnographic examples of graves mimicking houses or storage pits. Batammaliba graves, in Togo and Benin, are constructed as underground miniature houses of the dead.⁷ The graves of household heads are closed with a round flat stone, the *kubotan*, which in life is used to seal the hole which links the ground floor and first floor in the house. Funerary and birthing rites take place underneath this *tabote* hole, which embodies the house's life force and the continuum between birth, death and rebirth. Such examples teach the archaeologist to study funerary practices not in isolation but as a set of activities which link with other social practices such as building, dwelling and subsistence.

Rather than digging a grave specially for the corpse, the body may be placed in an existing hollow, scoop, ditch or pit dug for some other purpose, or in a natural feature such as a cave, fissure or rock shelter. The whole or partial human skeletons that are found in British Iron Age settlements are generally buried in abandoned grain storage pits or in silted-up ditches.⁸ At Danebury hillfort there are many of these storage pit burials but the numbers must represent only a small proportion of the population; where everybody else went is unknown. They have been interpreted as the bodies of people sacrificed along with the animals and other offerings found in these pits.⁹

Grave orientation

Orientation of the grave, its occupant(s) and tomb structures built over the grave may all be significant. The orientation of graves is an important feature for those world religions in which burial is the main rite. Moslem burials are aligned so that the body is laid facing Mecca and the Qibla. In the medieval and early modern periods, Jewish burials were arranged either south–north, with heads to the south, or west–east. Alternatively, the head might be placed towards the exit from the cemetery.¹⁰ Christian burials are laid west–east with their heads to the west so that they may arise on the Day of Judgement to face God in the east.¹¹ Within the pagan religions of post-Roman England and Viking Scandinavia, burials are orientated broadly east–west or north–south, copying the two orientations for longhouse dwellings of those periods. In the Viking Age these directions, towards the cardinal points, had cosmological significance.¹² Whether the arrangement of the pyre in the Rus funeral had such significance we do not know though Ibn Fadlan's references to the throwing of the dead rooster to the right and left of the ship suggest that something was going on. Indeed, the orientation of the dead is unlikely to be random.

Body arrangement

A dead body can be buried in one of many different positions: prone on its back, lying on one side, lying face down or even sitting up or standing. Bodies may be laid with their legs flexed or even tightly bent, perhaps tied so that the knees touch the chin. The discovery of skeletons in dramatic poses can suggest death occurred immediately prior to the body's being thrown into the grave pit, or even burial alive. At the pagan Anglo-Saxon cemetery of Sewerby in Yorkshire the skeleton of a woman, lying on her back, was placed below the skeleton of another woman, lying face down with arms and legs stretched out and spread.¹³ It is through comparison and contrast that archaeologists discover what are the normal postures in order to recognize the anomalies.

Slight differences in how the arms and legs are placed may help to reveal differences between groups within the same cemetery. For example, Ellen Pader's study of pagan Anglo-Saxon (fifth to sixth centuries AD) cemeteries in East Anglia in eastern England combined body position with the placing of grave goods in a multivariate statistical analysis to show that variations across each cemetery defined the presence of smaller groups within the population of each cemetery.¹⁴

As in most aspects of archaeology, the bigger the sample the more there is to compare. We cannot say a great deal about one body on its own but we can infer much when it can be compared to hundreds of others. It is through statistical methods rather than empathy and intuition that we learn about the nature of past funerary practices. In archaeological terms Ibn Fadlan's ethnographic account is severely limited because it describes only one funeral; archaeologists would want to know how other Rus dead were disposed of, and whether there are comparable mounds in the area and how their contents differed chronologically and socially.

CREMATION

Cremation, the practice of burning the corpse on a pyre, generally leaves archaeological traces only when the fragments of burnt bone left after the fire are buried. Such deposits are termed cremation burials. Cremations can be outrageously extravagant affairs but they

may leave few or even no archaeological traces. Very occasionally the site of the funeral pyre may be found but this tends to occur only when the pyre remains have been protected beneath later deposits (Figure 1.1). Pyre sites are sometimes found under cairns or mounds erected to cover the grave.

In order to bury the burnt bones left after a cremation, someone has to collect the pieces of bone from the extinguished pyre. The material selected for burial from the surface of the extinguished pyre normally forms only a proportion of the total debris, perhaps about 40–60 per cent of the original skeleton. Jacqui McKinley has noted that deposits of cremated bone from primary burials beneath Bronze Age barrows in England are generally heavier than those from Bronze Age open cemeteries, resulting from the more careful retrieval of bones for burial beneath a mound.¹⁵ She suggests that such differences may have been due to the status or popularity of the deceased.

Scattered cremated bone can occasionally be found where it has become incorporated into ditches or pits. Identification of these burnt bones as human may be difficult. Where cremated remains are interred below ground, the collected bones are often buried within or underneath a pot or organic container. The deposit may contain not only the burnt bones but also pyre material such as charcoal, fuel ash slag, carbonized plant remains and the burnt residues of various pyre goods, while other unburnt items may be added to the collection. Additionally the bones may derive from more than one individual, as in about 5 per cent of British prehistoric cases. There may also be remains of animals;¹⁶ for example, the discovery of bear claws in a number of Scandinavian Germanic Iron Age (AD 400–600) cremations may relate to the inclusion of a bearskin cloak on the funeral pyre.¹⁷ Cremated bones may be kept for many years prior to burial, perhaps awaiting mingling with the bones of individuals still alive.

Generally, cremated bone will yield less information than unburnt bones on age, height, sex, health, injuries, facial characteristics and pathology. On the positive side, cremated bone often survives in soils that are too acid to preserve unburnt bone. We ought to be able to identify the remains of an adult man and a young woman in the Rus funeral's pyre deposit and perhaps also to recognize the cut marks of the Angel of Death's broad-bladed dagger on the woman's burnt ribs. Other things would also survive: the iron weapons placed by the man's side, boat fittings such as rivets, the burnt bones of the animals, the gold buttons of the man's costume, and the charcoal from the ship's timbers, the scaffold and the pyre wood. The degree of shrinkage and colour change in the bone will also provide clues to the temperature and duration of the pyre.

GRAVE GOODS

Grave goods may include items which were possessions of the deceased, or they might be mourners' gifts to the dead. They may serve to equip the dead for the world of the afterlife, or to prevent the dead coming back to haunt the living. Grave goods may be selected to serve as reminders of a person's deeds or character. The commonest grave goods are clothing and related equipment, containers and remains of food and drink.

Adornment of the body

[W]hen we dress we wear inscribed upon our bodies the often obscure relationship of art, personal psychology and the social order.¹⁸

Though they cannot feel the cold and do not suffer pangs of modesty, we often like to dress up the dead.¹⁹ They may wear clothes that they never did in life. They may wear their best, or those vestments that will be least missed. They may be dressed in apparel which is made specifically for the dead, a category that includes shrouds and winding cloths. They may be eviscerated and embalmed so that they do not decay. Alternatively they may be left for weeks to rot, with the smell all too apparent. All of these elaborate preparations are for that brief moment when the corpse is displayed for the living before disappearing for ever. It is in those final moments that the living's memories of the dead person are congealed.

As with other forms of material culture, it is easy to lie – to misrepresent ourselves – with clothes, to take on a personality and status which is other than our normal self. Clothes and ornamentation are strategic representations through which we project our personalities and values. But at a funeral, choosing what to wear for the big event is not a matter decided by the deceased. Even the decision to leave the corpse in the clothes the dead person wore in life is one taken by the living. The dressing of the dead is always carried out by the living and consequently the costume of the dead constitutes the mourners' reading or representation of the dead person's former self-representation through dress. The deceased may be provided with a whole wardrobe of clothing, furniture and even living accoutrements for use in the afterlife. As Ibn Fadlan recounts in detail, one of the main elements of the Rus funeral is the making of fine clothes so that the dead man may be dressed in items which he never wore in life.

In the category of dress can be included clothing, body modification (tattoos, painting, scarification, piercing), ornamentation (lip plugs, ear-rings), hair-style (including body hair), and even portable equipment. A spear or a water pot on, or even beside, a body constitutes their incorporation into the complex mass of symbols that is an individual's dress and appearance. The modern executive might feel somehow incomplete without briefcase, Filofax and mobile phone. A prehistoric warrior – or individual of warrior status – might have felt similarly diminished without spear and sword even though these need never have been used in combat.

As archaeologists, we should be wary of how we separate the material culture *on* the body (clothes) from the material culture *of* the body (posture and body modification) from the material culture *off* the body (weapons, furniture and other items). We need to be aware of how easily we impose our own categories on to the past, dividing up 'clothing', 'furniture', 'weaponry' and 'jewellery' out of assemblages whose totality relates to the entire representation of the deceased's appearance or 'dress'. The clothing of the dead thus constitutes a hall of mirrors, representations of representations, in which things may not be entirely what they seem at first glance.

In contemporary British culture, the outward appearance of the dead can be puzzling enough. A recently married woman might be decked out in her wedding dress, which was made for her grandmother. An old man may wear the suit that he almost never wore in life except to other people's funerals. And this is a culture where we believe we go naked before God. The coffin itself is a crucial part of the furnishing of the body; like the backless nylon smock worn by many of the dead, it cannot be used in life. The corpse may also have undergone some dramatic body modification: if we die in medically unsupervised circumstances (which about one-third of us do), the obligatory – and culturally sanctioned – post-mortem examination, performed on 22 per cent of the population in Britain, leaves us with the tops of our heads sawn off, our chests ripped open and our entrails messed about with.²⁰

People in the past probably did not equip their dead for us to ponder over. Instead they provided them with items, posture and appearance which were considered appropriate to the context of death, to the mourners and to the individual deceased. The Rus on the Volga had his clothing made for the funeral, a tradition which may have been prevalent throughout the Viking world. In other cases items might be heirlooms that have been kept for decades. The choice of what should accompany the dead is one that changes and fluctuates. The fashion for dressing the dead in one era can be radically transformed in another. For the archaeologist, what is interesting is not just how the things were made but the comparisons with non-funerary contexts and with different periods in time to see how traditions of funerary garb changed.

Food and drink

Food is coercive. We have to follow its rhythm, and not vice versa. It has power over us. Food as identity, as our physical selves, as a way of thought, as sex, as power, as friendship, as a medium for magic and witchcraft, as our time-controller – in all these ways and more, food pervades our culture and gives meaning to our lives. It plays a central role in our societies, and provides us as much with intricate symbols and metaphors as with nutritional substance.²¹

Regular accompaniments for the dead in past cultures include animal bones (whole skeletons or merely portions), containers such as pots and bowls, trays and tableware. Archaeologists used to understand these items in very literal terms as mere accoutrements to feed the dead in the other world rather than as complex symbols which express the various values, aims and attitudes of the mourners in the face of death. The placing of food and drink in a grave is only part, and not necessarily the last part, of a whole sequence of feasts, fasts or food offerings which is triggered by a death.

Food marks the differential status of the living and the dead; on the Pacific island of Tikopia, mourners eat cooked food, symbolic of the social and domestic life disrupted by death, and raw food is placed on the grave as a symbol of the product of the deceased's labours.²²

Food marks identity; the islanders of Dobu (off the south-east tip of Papua New Guinea) consider yams to be metamorphosized people and the cultivation of yams is perceived as a metaphorical representation of the kinship system.²³ Within the stone-set circular enclosure at the centre of each Dobu village are buried the women of the village's matriline and their brothers, ancestors who confer ownership of the soil and inheritance in the same way that seed yams generate yams for harvest.

Food marks social status; the cattle, horses and chickens in the Rus funeral may have been a measure of the man's standing. Alternatively these animals may have been highly symbolic of something else such as his gender or kinship, or the appropriate sacrifices required by divination.

Pots placed with the dead may contain liquids and foodstuffs. Yet funerary pots need not have contained sustenance: they may simply have stood for the symbolic meal partaken by the dead. In some cases the metaphorical association of pots at funerals is not as containers of food but as containers of souls. In the nineteenth century African Americans in the southern USA used to place broken pots on graves to prevent the dead from coming back.²⁴ In later years the pots were replaced by stopped clocks or watches, set to the time of death or to twelve, to wake the dead on Judgement Day.

Archaeological specialists in animal bones, palynology (pollen analysis), food residues and plant remains can, in the right conditions, identify the foods and drinks placed with the dead. For example, soil samples taken from an Early Bronze Age cist burial at Ashgrove in Scotland contained pollen which appears to have derived from a honeyed mead. This had probably spilled out of the Beaker pot found in the grave.²⁵ Using such analyses we compare different burial contexts, and make comparisons with non-funerary contexts. Were there a sufficient number of Rus cremations for comparison, we might be able to say more about the meaning and significance of the particular animals killed for the dead man.

Artefacts of separation and transition

Grave goods may prepare the dead for the other world but equally they may serve to prevent them from remaining in the world of the living or simply ensure a good send-off. In western culture cut flowers are a major feature of funerals, a tradition that may originate in the herbs, flowers and evergreens of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England but which bloomed in Britain from the early eighteenth century onwards.²⁶ Although there is a growing tradition of planting living flowers at the grave, the symbolism of the short life of cut flowers is a significant feature of contemporary funerals. A recent dispute in 1998 in the Northamptonshire churchyard of Orlingbury highlights this quality. The Bishop of Peterborough has forbidden mourners to inscribe a gravestone with the term 'Nan' because the word is deemed unsuitable as a permanent and dignified marker for the dead woman. Yet he was perfectly happy for 'Nan' to be written in a floral tribute three feet high at the funeral, presumably because it was then a thing of transience.

The placing of a person's possessions on or in their grave may represent the dead's severance from the living. Among the Iban of Borneo a knife may be included in burials to symbolize the cutting of those ties. Conversely, the sacrifice of possessions, living and inanimate, may ensure communication with the other world. They may be viewed as gifts, tribute or even fines to be paid to the supernatural as expressions of a reciprocal relationship rather than a material exchange. Such gifts may not necessarily force a repayment from the supernatural but link the living to that realm. Animals such as horses and dogs, along with human sacrifices of slaves, spouses and entire entourages, have been regular sacrificial choices as 'companions' for the deceased. Equally, feasting animals – cattle, sheep, pigs and birds – are sacrificed for the dead but they are generally as much for the mourners as for the deceased and often only a portion of the animal may be placed in the grave, if buried at all.

The archaeologist has to be aware that grave goods are carefully selected and yet may have many different meanings. They may be ordinary items or they may be specially made for the occasion. They may be consumed or destroyed during the funeral or put in the grave. Equally, items destined for the dead may be left above ground or hung in the branches of a nearby tree, thereby condemned to almost certain invisibility to the archaeologist's eye. The study of variations in grave good provision is thus a difficult jigsaw puzzle with many pieces missing.

CEMETERY ORGANIZATION

Archaeologists have been interested in the location patterns of burials within cemeteries since the beginnings of the discipline because they may shed light on the relative dating of graves and the grave goods within them. According to the principles of horizontal

stratigraphy, if a cemetery grows in size in one or more directions then the burials in one part of it will be of a different date to those in another. Early scholars such as Montelius and Déchelette were able to develop typologies of fast-changing artefact styles, such as brooch types in European Iron Age cemeteries, to build up chronological frameworks. Patterns of cemetery growth can, however, be very varied and complex. Few cemeteries grow randomly and there is normally some set of organizing principles in use.

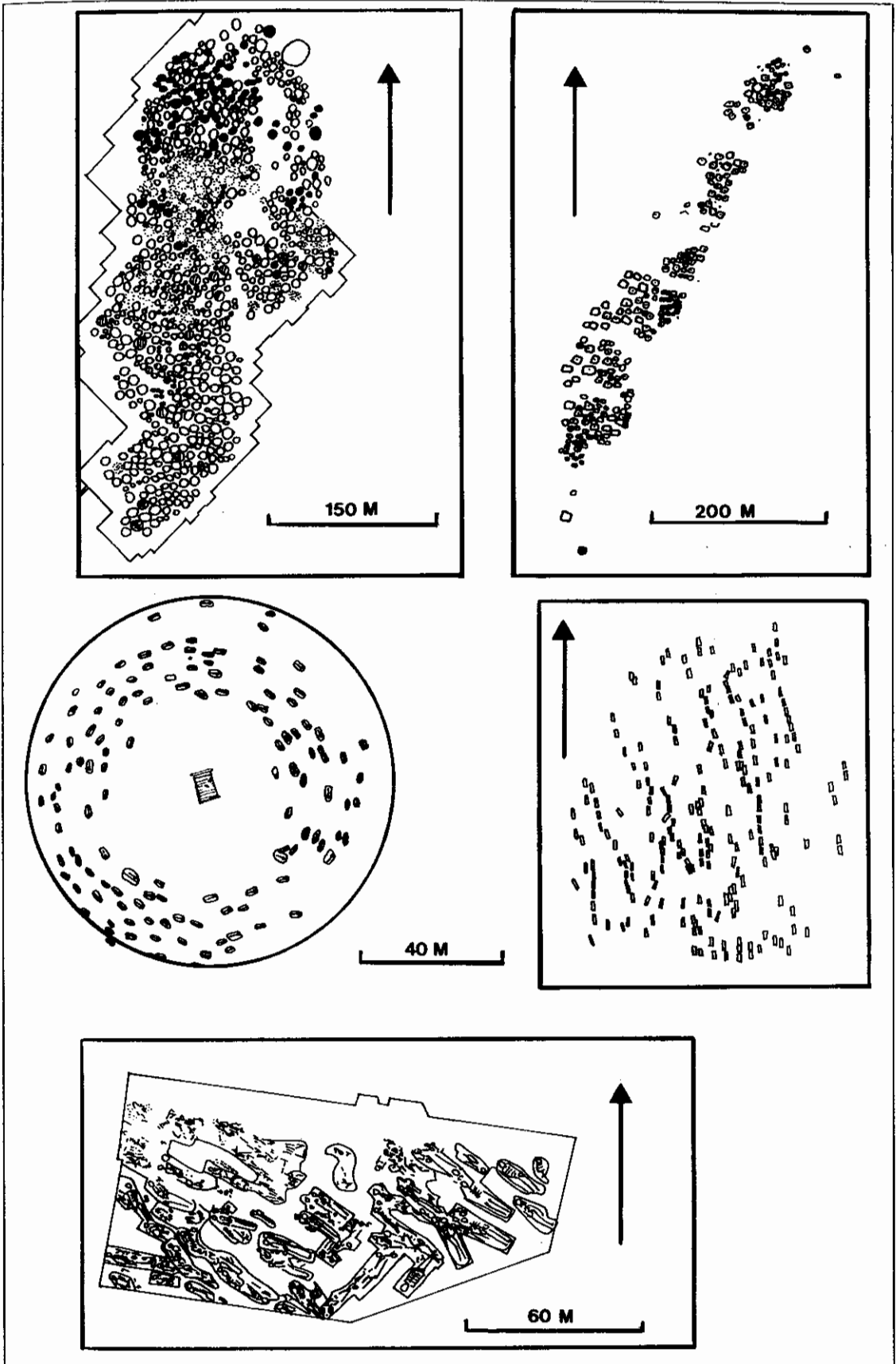
Easily recognizable organized patterns are linear, hierarchical/concentric and segmented. Linear cemeteries, producing the horizontal stratigraphy described above, often develop from a focal point such as a founder's grave or a physical barrier such as a field ditch. The pre-Roman Iron Age cremation cemetery at Årupgård in Denmark is a good example, expanding southwards from around a burial mound of the Middle Bronze Age.²⁷ Concentric or hierarchical patterns grow out from and respect a central burial (Figure 1.2). At the large burial mound of the Magdalenenburg in Switzerland, dating to the sixth century BC in the Early Iron Age, the central chamber is surrounded by a cemetery of inhumations placed concentrically around this focal grave.²⁸

Segmented cemeteries are divided into discrete sections or clusters and sometimes have open spaces between each group of graves.²⁹ Each segment may be arranged either in an unstructured group or in a row structure. Row-structured segments are arranged with the inhumations aligned either side by side or head to toe (Figure 1.2). An example of head-to-toe row structure is the Early Bronze Age cemetery of Mokrin in the former Yugoslavia.³⁰ Among Mississippian period cemeteries in the United States, Schild Knoll A was arranged into a series of side-by-side rows and unstructured clusters while Schild Knoll B had a more complex pattern of not only side-by-side rows and unstructured clusters, but also some graves arranged into a concentric pattern around the knoll and others arranged around a likely charnel house.³¹ Lynne Goldstein interpreted these clusters as family or kin units and inferred that Mississippian society was organized on the basis of corporate or lineal descent groups. In cemeteries where discrete clusters are not apparent, it may be possible to identify spatial groupings on the basis of body positioning or other specific, localized treatment. Pader's study of body positioning, described above, was able to identify such groupings.

Social differences and cemetery organization

Cemeteries reveal much more than grave good variation and chronology, and may provide evidence about kinship, gender and other indicators of social status. Detailed analyses of these issues require the use of statistical methods on large samples of sometimes many hundreds of graves. The identification of intra-cemetery clusters often requires statistical techniques such as cluster analysis, principal co-ordinate and principal component analysis, and significance tests.³² In some cases clusters may be gender-segregated, such as the first century BC–AD Iron Age cremation cemeteries of northern Germany and southern Jutland where brooches, needles and curved knives are found in the sector of female graves while swords, spears, shields and long knives are found in the area with male cremated bodies. In some medieval and later Jewish cemeteries in Europe it was the tradition to bury men and women in separate areas but the medieval Jewbury cemetery in York shows a more complex pattern in which male and female burials are intermixed yet with some evident clusters of male and female burials.³³

Cemeteries may be status-segregated. In seventeenth- to eighteenth-century Manhattan African Americans were forbidden burial in the churchyards and had to use their own

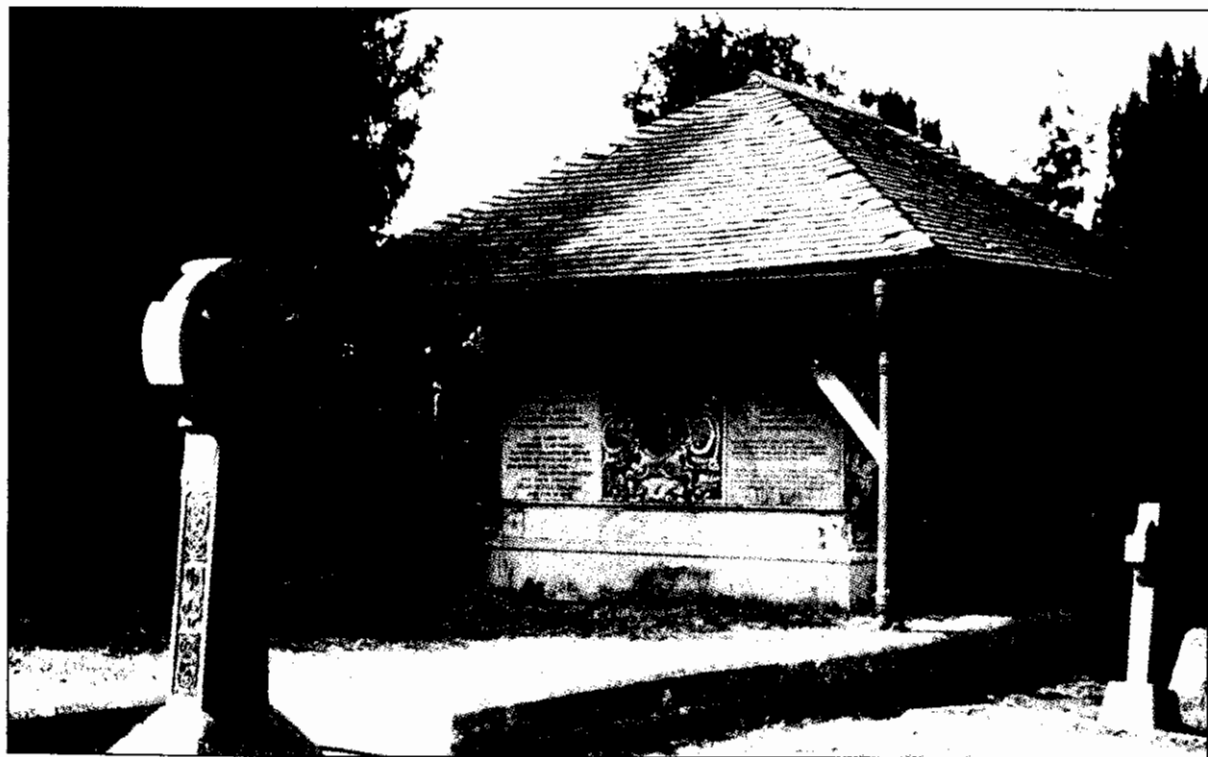


1.2 Different forms of cemetery organization: (from left to right) linear (Årupgård), segmented (Carnaby, Iron Age East Yorkshire), concentric (Magdalenenburg), row segmented head-to-toe (Mokrin), row segmented side-by-side (Wickliffe Mound C, Mississippian period).

burial ground.³⁴ At the Cliff's Plantation in Virginia the burials were divided into two distinct groups. The northern group of burials was identified as those of the plantation owners – the high lead levels in the bones were caused by the use of pewter tableware (they had been slowly poisoning themselves!). The southern group, with much lower levels of lead, was identified as the burials of black slaves.³⁵

Hierarchical patterns are often found in European churchyards; ecclesiastical codes specified burial plots according to social status. Post-medieval English churches and churchyards maintained a set of strong status distinctions in establishing a geography of holiness and inclusion.³⁶ The local lord of the manor and his family were normally interred within the church itself. The well-to-do were buried in the sunnier south side of the churchyard, vying for space in the prestigious section immediately outside the south door where their gravestones would be seen by every churchgoer. The poor were buried on the darker, north side of the churchyard, an area associated in folklore with evil and the devil (Figure 1.3).

In these medieval and later churchyards, burial plots were organized not only by status but also by family groupings based on descent and post-marital residence. Family plots can be clearly seen from the seventeenth- to twentieth-century gravestones in any churchyard. Archaeologically the distinction of churchyard burials into family groupings without the aid of gravestones can be near impossible owing to the degree of crowding and inter-cutting of graves. Urban churchyards became so crowded that, in the early nineteenth-century metropolises of Britain, gravediggers got drunk in order to cope with the appalling stench as they sawed through undecayed corpses and coffins. One gravedigger even had a corpse fall on top of him, out of the side of the grave he was digging.³⁷



1.3 The traditional avoidance of the English churchyard's north side as a place of burial declined in the nineteenth century but was still so strong that the Magniac family, the lords of Colworth manor in Sharnbrook, Bedfordshire, deliberately placed their new burial vault on the parish church's north side during the 1860s to encourage others to abandon their superstition.

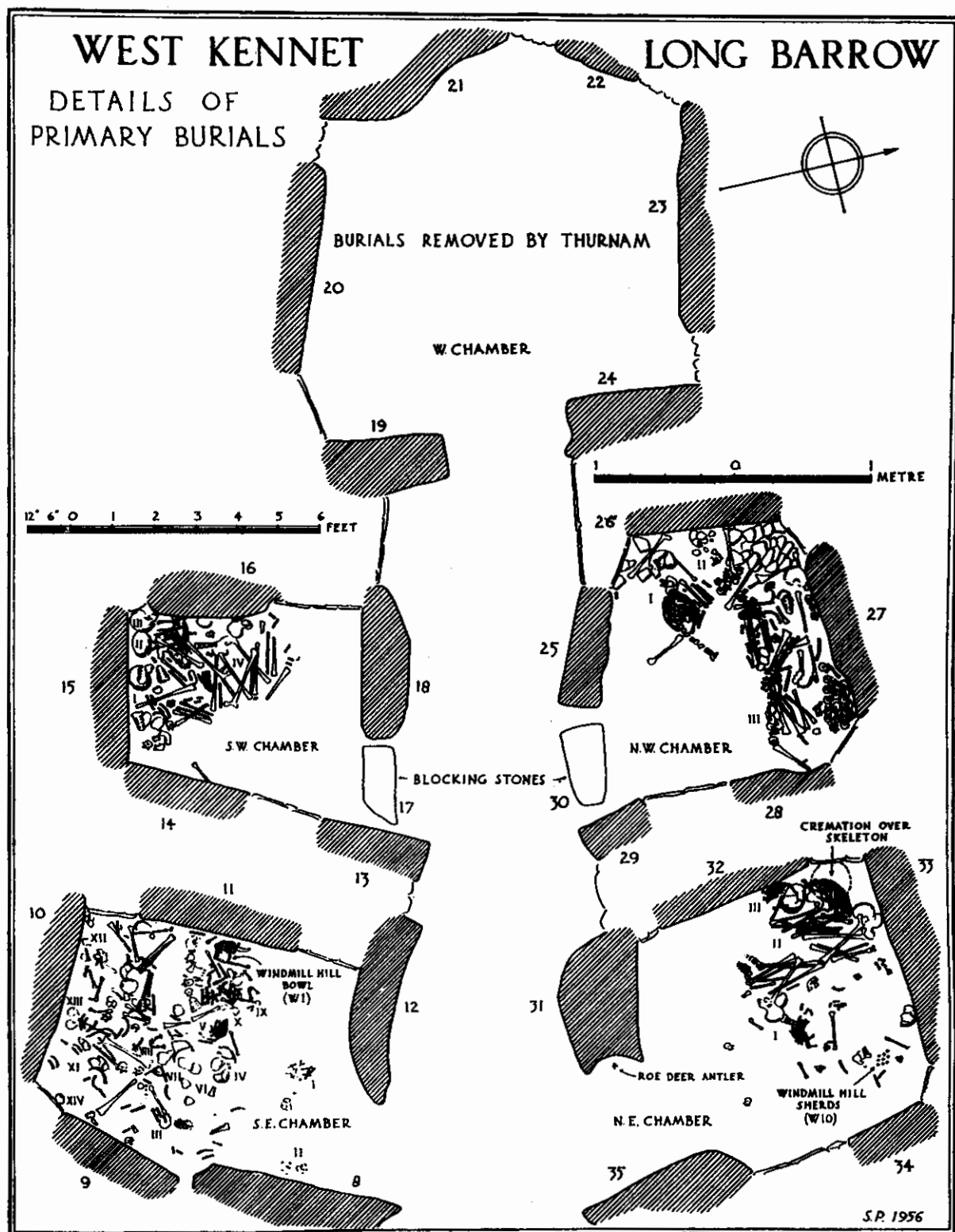
Distinction between normal and deviant individuals can also be expressed spatially.³⁸ From the late fifteenth century onwards in England there were traditions that suicides were staked down in burials at crossroads while women who died in childbirth were supposedly buried outside the wall around the consecrated ground of the churchyard.³⁹ At the early medieval cemetery at Sutton Hoo (early seventh century AD), a group of unusual burials lies to the east of the royal mound burials that include the famous treasure ship. This eastern group contains not one metal grave good. Some of the bodies appear to have been mutilated by decapitation or breaking of the limbs (**Figure 1.4**).⁴⁰ These individuals are most likely execution victims, either killed when the adjacent Middle Saxon royal burial ground was in use or brought here in later centuries for public execution. One of the earliest cemeteries in Europe, the Late Mesolithic cemetery of Vedbaek in Denmark, has been interpreted as a deviants' cemetery. Bryony Coles suggests that the age and sex profiles are not those of an ordinary population – there is a surprising number of individuals in mid-life, including childbirth deaths, and too few children or mature adults.⁴¹ She suggests that most individuals from the Mesolithic Vedbaek community were disposed of elsewhere; they were not interred in this small cemetery set on a small hill behind the coastal settlement.

Segregation according to age is relatively easy to detect when the bones survive. It has been suggested as one of the structuring principles for the placing of skeletal remains in the distinct chambers of the stone-built Earlier Neolithic communal tombs in the Cotswold area of southern England, such as Burn Ground, Notgrove and West Kennet (**Figure 1.5**).⁴² In the medieval Jewish cemeteries at Winchester and York child burials are grouped separately from those of adults.⁴³

Finally, large urban cemeteries may be divided according to ethnic groupings or religious affiliations. In a modern British cemetery one will find special areas for burials of Moslems, Jews, Poles, Italians, Gypsies and showmen's families while Victorian cemeteries often demarcated areas for non-conformists separate from Church of England worshippers.⁴⁴ Such distinctions are often hard to detect archaeologically, though they may involve differences in grave orientation, grave preparation and grave goods. One example is the possible presence of East Europeans in the Roman cemetery of Lankhills at Winchester in southern England, which contains a small cluster of burials equipped with brooches of a type ordinarily found in that part of the Roman empire which is now Hungary.⁴⁵



1.4 One of the Sutton Hoo burials preserved as stains in the sandy soil. Another of these burials, known as the 'ploughman', has his legs splayed astride a long wooden object initially identified as a plough though Martin Carver has suggested that it might be a collapsed gallows.



1.5 The distribution of bones in the Neolithic chambered tomb at West Kennet (c. 3400 BC). The abundance of foot and hand bones suggests that most corpses were brought whole into this tomb, with some skulls being removed in a secondary rite performed after the flesh had rotted from the body.

Changes over time

An important aspect of cemetery dynamics is that of founding and abandonment. Funerary archaeologists concentrate on the period when a cemetery was in use but may give less thought as to why it was begun or abandoned. It was probably for reasons other than perceived 'fullness' that most cemeteries in the past were abandoned or begun. Even when a community moves away from an area, people may return for many years to come in order to bury their dead in the same cemetery. The break with tradition that is marked by founding or abandonment can be a momentous event. A founder's grave may mark the fissioning of a lineage as one family group breaks away from the larger kin group. It may also be part of an expansion into new land as the decision is taken not to bring the dead back to the usual place of disposal. The act of burial itself also serves to physically 'plant' the dead into the land, making their remains an inalienable and fixed part of that land.

The moment of abandonment may scarcely be noticed, the last of a dwindling number of burials perhaps of the less notable members of the community, if a new cemetery or new rites have been adopted by the majority. The regional study of founding and abandonment sequences can yield information about significant social changes and watersheds. For example, during the period 600 BC–AD 600 in southern Jutland most cemeteries were founded or abandoned within certain short timespans, notably around 50 BC and AD 200, co-occurring with major changes in gender definition, household organization and political authority.⁴⁶

HUMAN SACRIFICE

The killing of the slave girl by the Rus so that she might accompany her master in death is a classic example of human sacrifice. Other tenth-century burials which are probably human sacrifices are known from elsewhere in the Viking world. The Viking 'queen' buried in the exceptionally well-preserved Oseberg ship in Norway was accompanied by the body of an elderly woman, perhaps her personal slave.⁴⁷ In Denmark the cemetery at Stengade contains the burial of a man with a silver-inlaid spear in a wooden chamber grave on top of which is the decapitated body of a man wearing iron handcuffs. In the cemetery at Lejre a decapitated man in one of the burials appears to have had his hands bound, while a woman's burial appears to have been accompanied by a probable male.⁴⁸ Similar practices are also known in England between the sixth and seventh centuries AD.⁴⁹

Human sacrifice has sometimes been discussed in terms of the sublimation of primitive aggression, designed to abolish uncontrolled violence by substituting violent rites which serve as a warning to the rest.⁵⁰ It can also be considered as the ultimate in reciprocal exchange or submission by the living to the supernatural, the gift or tribute which is the most precious that people can give to the gods – human life itself.⁵¹ It has even been considered as the primary check against the animal in man.⁵² Yet such a powerful concept may be surprisingly hard to define, especially since there can be a fine line dividing it from execution of war captives or criminals, or from altruistic self-sacrifice.⁵³

Human sacrifice is generally considered to be directed at supernatural entities and carried out under the auspices of ritual specialists. Often the death is welcomed or even brought about by the victim who may be considered a scapegoat for society's ills and misfortunes. Thus, within the broad ambit of human sacrifice can be included the Rus slave girl and other sacrificial victims for funerals, the *kamikaze* pilots of Second World War Japan sacrificing themselves for the divine emperor, the killing of thousands of war

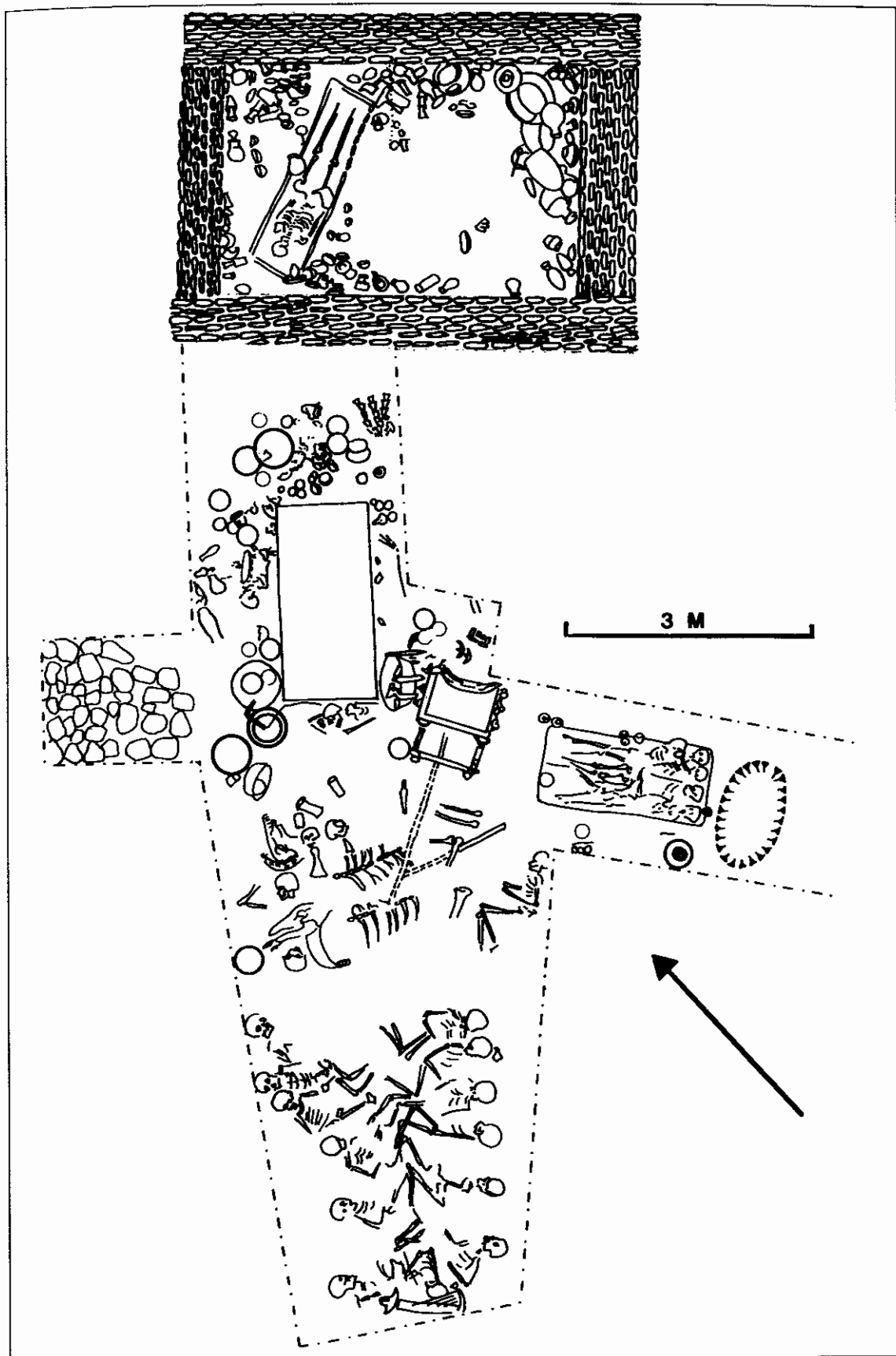
captives by the Aztecs to ensure that the sun continued to rise, the South Asian practice of *suttee* in which the widow is cast alive into the flames of her dead husband's pyre, the death of the man-god Jesus Christ who sacrificed himself for others' sins, the self-sacrifice of cult members such as Jim Jones's followers in Jonestown, Guyana, and even the judicial executions of convicted criminals in America.⁵⁴

As Gordon Childe noted in 1945, human sacrifice on a large scale has been a frequent characteristic of the funerals of autocratic rulers of emergent states, as exhibited by the Egyptian First Dynasty tombs at Abydos, c. 3100–2890 BC, the Mesopotamian royal tombs at Ur around 2500 BC (Figure 1.6) and the mid-second millennium BC Shang dynasty tombs at Anyang in China.⁵⁵ Since Childe's time there have been further discoveries. At Sipán in Peru the third century AD tomb of a Moche noble, 'the Lord of Sipán', also contained a tomb guardian and the bodies of another two men and three women; a similar tomb, that of 'the Old Lord of Sipán', also contained additional male and female burials.⁵⁶ At Palenque in Mexico the tomb of the seventh century AD Maya ruler Pacal lay hidden within the pyramid known as the Temple of the Inscriptions, accompanied by the skeletons of a group of young adults above the slab covering Pacal's sarcophagus.⁵⁷ Other examples are known from Kerma in the Sudan (c. 1800–1600 BC), Cahokia in the south-east USA (c. AD 1000), the first Chinese emperor's tomb at Mount Li in AD 210, and the early nineteenth-century Baganda kingdom in Uganda.⁵⁸ Why such mass sacrifices occurred at crucial moments in state formation is examined in detail in Chapter 7.

A second category of sacrificial victims is that of individuals who are killed and offered to the supernatural within special sacred places other than cemeteries. A spectacular case of mass sacrifice is indicated by the burials of over a hundred 'warriors' underneath the Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacán in Mexico, around AD 150, possibly as supernatural guardians of the temple.⁵⁹ In well-preserved examples such as the Neolithic and Iron Age bog bodies of north-west Europe (which will be explained in detail in Chapter 3) and the mountain-top Inka period (1438–1532 AD) child sacrifices in Peru and Chile, the surviving skin and tissues often allow forensic study to determine the nature and cause of death.

The evidence from the Inka period in South America is incontrovertible. Spectacularly well-preserved corpses of children and young adults have been found 'freeze-dried' on mountain tops at extraordinary altitudes. Among the most stunning discoveries are a near-naked twenty-year-old man on the summit of Cerro del Toro in Argentina, who seems to have been drugged and left to freeze to death, a naked eighteen-year-old woman near the summit of Pichu Pichu in Peru, apparently killed by being hit on the head, and a young boy on Cerro el Plomo in Chile, wearing a tunic and accompanied by a silver human figurine and a gold llama figurine.⁶⁰ These and many others were offered by the Inka as *capacocha* sacrifices to the sun god, bestowing considerable prestige on the child's parents and on their local community. In death the victims became guardian spirits linked to the Inka ruler who derived his power from the ritual killings of these children.

In 1622, long after the Spanish had conquered the Inka empire and while they were destroying the Inka ancestor cult, Hernández Príncipe wrote about an earlier *capacocha* incident in which a local official from Ocos, named Caque Poma, was rewarded by the Inka authorities for building an irrigation canal by being given permission to sacrifice his own daughter to the sun deity. The father and daughter journeyed to Cuzco to pay homage to the Inka rulers and their gods and ancestors, subsequently returning home for the sacrifice. The girl went willingly to her death, walled up alive in a shaft tomb at the top of the mountain on which were located the storehouses for the crops from the newly irrigated fields. She



1.6 Grave 800, the tomb of Pu-abi (formerly identified as Shub-ad) among the sixteen royal graves at Ur. She was buried in a vault (at the top of the picture) with twenty-seven retainers including soldiers, handmaidens, a harpist and a 'keeper of the wardrobe'.

became an important local deity, embodying fertility, corn production and health, and Caque Poma became a successful man and subsequently an important ancestor.⁶¹

In a remarkable account of contemporary Chile and Peru, Patrick Tierney claims that the practice of human sacrifice did not die out after the coming of the conquistadores but is still practised by shamans for individuals seeking to avert natural disasters or to improve their wealth.⁶² Tierney notes there are many stories in the region of cocaine traffickers allegedly sponsoring shamans to carry out human sacrifices so as to increase their wealth and success. Exactly where the line is drawn between gangster killings and local understandings of these events as human sacrifices is difficult to know.

CONCLUSION

It might seem that archaeology is a straightforward process of discovery followed by description, yet it is accompanied by interpretation at every step. Interpretation draws on theory – our rationalizations of our experiences in the world – in order to make sense of how and why people of the past treated their dead, disposed of their remains, and provided ways for the dead to co-exist with the living. The following chapters examine the theoretical themes which have guided approaches to the archaeology of death, such as the organizing frameworks provided by the human body and the inhabited landscape, the significance of power and gender relationships, the human awareness and experience of death and the political dimensions of funerary archaeology as a practice in the present.

First we must explore something of the extraordinary diversity of contemporary and recent treatments of the dead around the world in order to find out how different they may be and what aspects are commonly found. We will not be searching for what used to be called ‘ethnographic parallels’ – no single society has ever been the same as another. The aim of looking at the full range of known funerary practices is to ensure that we avoid imposing the rationalizations of our particular ethnocentric cultural logic on to the past. The analogies that inform our interpretations must be made explicit: they should be appropriately chosen, and not forced on to the archaeological context. As the next chapter will explain, analogies between ethnographic and archaeological data should be judged by the degree of congruence and compatibility between relevant aspects of those societies past and present.