
Symposium: The Archaeology of Burial, Ritual and the Sacred Domain

Neil Price

Throughout the history of research into the past, scholars have been concerned with ancient peoples' attempts to understand the nature of human existence and its perceived place in a broader cosmology. These issues embrace a seemingly infinite variety of concepts, most frequently encountered archaeologically in the form of the material response to death. This session will confront a selection of these ideas from around the globe - with contributions from Europe, the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Middle East - considering the archaeology of burial together with its ritual and sacral environment.

The session will first focus specifically on burial practice, examining a range of factors involved in the disposal of the dead; these will include the signalling of social categories such as age and gender, attitudes to the individual and the iconography of funerary monuments. We will also be exploring the expression of ethnic or cultural identity through (pre)historic mortuary behaviour, and in the present, often contested context of Fourth World peoples' relationship to their heritage. The session will then examine the wider perspective of ritual and cult, looking at the function of belief systems such as shamanism, and continuity in religious perception both in terms of perpetuated mythologies and in the more material construction of sacred geographies.

The Illyrian works of art in portraits plastic of the Roman time, the territory of Dardania

Exhlale Dobruna-Salihu

Among all the motifs of tombstones in the territory of Dardania, the artistic presentations of the dead in the form of bust-portraits hold the most important place. Among them of particular interest are those portraits which are connected to the Illyrian popular art created by master workmen in non-classical style, in a primitive way, according to the traditions of antiquity. As such they have the authentic charm of original art and they bear a resemblance to the creative work of today, the so-called 'naïve' art. Because of this, Rendic-Miocevic calls them 'Illyrian Naiva', and they are to be found throughout the Illyrian area. The greater similarities that we found in the south-eastern part of the province of Dalmacia. Outside the Illyrian territory they could be found in the province of Gaul too. The pictures made in this style are evidence of preservation of the national culture, and in the field of art as well, of the native Illyrians even during the Roman reign. Their presence in the late time of antique is connected with Illyrian renaissance which would become the basis of Albanian culture and art.

Some evidence for ritual use of figurines in Neolithic Thessaly, Greece

Kostas Gallis

There are presented two finds of figurines, which came to light during the excavations at Platia Magoula Zarkou, 30 kms west of Larisa, in Thessaly Greece. The first find consists of a house model with figurines, found below the floor of a house dating to the beginning of the Late Neolithic. The model was buried under the floor near the hearth of the house, and the ground was levelled above it. It contained eight figurines, apparently representing a traditional family of a typical Neolithic household in Thessaly. It was probably buried beneath the floor as part of a ritual during the construction of the house – a foundation offering. The second find of figurines comes from the cremation cemetery of Platia Magoula Zarkou. The two figurines were found near two urns and they seemed to have been put there as some kind of an offering to the dead. They are made of the same grey clay like the figurines of the house model and they date to the same phase.

At Platia Magoula Zarkou then, there are found figurines of the same chronological phase and most probably coming from the same production centre, used by the same people for ritual purposes.

Pre-burial ritualism from a pastoral Neolithic mortuary site, Kenya

Caesar G. Kimaru

The purpose of this article is to discuss the significance of ritualism presented by grave goods from a pastoral Neolithic mortuary site in East Lake Turkana, Kenya. Analysis of excavated human remains from the site of Il Lokerided indicates that human skeletal remains and grave goods were selectively buried with the deceased depending on the purpose each item served while the deceased was living.

The revealed pre-burial practices suggest that pastoral Neolithic communities in this part of East Africa may have had a social consciousness about life after death.

The image of death and funerary art in N.O. Argentina tradition

María Florencia Kusch

We offer in this paper the results of research aiming at the study the use of the images and symbols of death in the N.O. Argentina (900-1400 d.C.) funerary art. To that end, we emphasise the stylistic analysis and their relationship with characteristic funerary aspect.

Introducing and investigation of the decorative features of stone graves of the cemetery Zagh-Abad

Mohammad Reza Hajheidary

The town of Khomenishar is located 8km northwest of Isfahan. In spite of having a long history, historians have paid little attention to this city. Among the monuments of this city; we can name the masque of khozan (Islamic periods), the fire temple (related to Susanna period) which was of the seven respectful worship places of Zoroastrians. Near this fire temple, there is place called aderyan, which in Avestian language means fire, and Aderyan is the place where fire was radiant. In the Zagh-Abad cemetery, there are very large grave stone which are 2 meters in length and 80 centimetres in width and they are decorated with invaluable animal and planting features which indicate the greatness of this place in successive centuries. The oldest known of these stones dates back to the eighth century A.C.

In this article, I have tried to study these vertical gravestones and their decorative features in history.

The riders and the eaters: Shamanism and its functions among the peoples of Viking Age Scandinavia

Neil Price

The suggestion that shamanism occupied a central position in Viking Age Scandinavian religion has been debated for over a century by comparative theologians and philologists, though seldom by archaeologists. In addition to a neglect of the material culture, common to much of this work has been a failure to address the implications that such an interpretation has for the nature and social context of Viking religion, and especially its provision of a world-view that has not been acknowledged in current models of the period. These issues also concern a consistently marginalised aspect of Viking studies, namely the relationship between the Nordic population and the Sámi people with whom they shared the Scandinavian peninsula; the latter's undoubted practice of shamanism suggests unexplored avenues of cross-cultural interaction. Using a range of source material, the paper rejects a monolithic view of 'the Viking (or Sámi) shaman' and instead suggests the existence of different types of Scandinavian sorcerer, each with specific functions, skills and social roles. This is set in the context of regional variation and change over time, and parallels are drawn between Sámi and Nordic shamanism, which focus on conceptual similarities rather than the influence of one culture by the other.

Archaeology and religion: A case study of the Mother Goddess worship in India

Pranabananda Jash

Indian archaeological storehouses are full of evidence relating to the historical bearings of the contemporary period. Unfortunately, neither the archaeologists nor the historians have satisfactorily developed their ideas in this respect.

The present paper aims at to throw light on the earlier history of the cult of Mother Goddess when society was in its most primitive stages - the form and worship of the Goddess corresponding to the beliefs held by the people of these times. The changing nature and characteristic features of the cult deity are distinctly discernible in the earlier vedic and later vedic times when she gradually emerges as an important deity and is represented in the archaeological record in the form of sculptures, coins, etc. As time rolled on, a relationship is established between the Goddess and the three major gods of the Bramhbanical (Hindu) Trinity. In the subsequent period especially from the Gupta period (c.320 A.D) onwards the role of Mother Goddess is regarded as an indispensable factor in Indian religion from the contemporary literary and archaeological artefacts.

Mortuary practices of the Central European Late Eneolithic and their social significance

Jan Turek

Within my paper I argue that in Corded Ware funerary practices, specifically in cemeteries containing single burials, great attention was paid to the symbolic expression of individuality which is however in this case

expressed in uniform funerary practices. It is expression of an individual's association with a particular social category rather than special skills or status achieved within a person's life.

Exceptional evidence of a communal cremation burial of the Late Eneolithic Corded Ware was recently recovered in Central Bohemia. A deposit of at least four cremated human bodies was accompanied by another three inhumations and numerous grave goods. This is the first case where a cremation was recorded among the evidence of Corded Ware burial rites in Bohemia. Importantly, within the area of the cremation deposit spatial clustering was indicated, deliberately biased towards the collection and deposition of cranial bones. We can't explain the use of the cremation method in this particular grave, but even given this different method of burial, the essential symbolic rule of the Corded Ware burial rite was respected. Cremation as a method of disposing of the dead is similar in form in all periods; however its social symbolic meaning may vary in different prehistoric periods.

Ancient cult sites in Latvia. A way from past to past?

Prof. Dr. J. Urtans

The present territory of Baltic states was the last baptised in Eastern Europe in 13 - 15 century. For this reason pagan cult sites of lower level survived and even developed in medieval time and up to the 19th century. At present, about 1500 ancient cult sites in Latvia are known; some enjoying state protection. The ancient cult sites could be investigated using methods of archaeology, folklore, history and combined methods.

In the last decades a new approach to the investigation of ancient cult sites appeared, which possibly could be named the 'esoteric approach'. Scientific methods are not accessible for the follower of the esoteric approach. Unfortunately, followers of esoteric methods sometimes alter certain ancient cult sites with the idea to put them in order, deepening the ancient carvings or cup marks etc. The way to put things in sustainable order is to develop the opinion that ancient cult sites are valuable by themselves and nobody has any right to change the visual shape of those sites in any way without corresponding permission of heritage protection authorities.

Cultural transference of the sacred geography of Bañados del Pantano, La Rioja (Argentina)

Marcelo Valko and Florencia Kusch

The oral histories of Bañados del Pantano indicate that these native groups recognised the area as sacred. Beliefs about the sacred geography of the area were transferred from group to group as new peoples entered the area over the course of several centuries.

Stone tools and burial practices in the later prehistory of the Netherlands

Annelou van Gijn

Various Neolithic and Bronze Age flint assemblages from settlement, burial and hoard context have been studied for raw material choice, technological features and functional applications. Through time a differentiation takes place between burial and settlement context. In the Early Neolithic the flint tools in the settlements and the burials are the same, whereas in later periods special implements, frequently imported tools, were given to the dead. Many of these flint tools turn out to be specifically made and lack all traces of use. In this paper the burial goods from Bandkeramik, Funnelbeaker, Single grave, Bell Beaker and Early Bronze Age assemblages will be compared in terms of the choice of raw material, technological features, typology and function and various explanatory hypotheses will be evaluated.

The funeral rite of the early cattle-breeders of Hwarezm

L.T.Yablonsky

Archaeological materials do not contain direct information about ethnic affiliation, but material culture clearly reflects the economic pattern and ideological conceptions of concrete human collectives. In this respect good prospects are opened up by data of funeral rites of the ancient cattle-breeders of Khwarezm. All the data suggest that in the early period of the 1-st millennium BC Khwarezm must have been peopled by different ethnic groups with different genetic roots. Manifestation of the Saka's rituals and conceptions showed further development in the middle of the 1-st millennium BC. Collective burials first appear in the 4-th century BC, and the custom of successive burial in one chamber survived. At this time, the first burials of pre-cleaned human bones in every-day vessels made their appearance in Khwarezm. Burials of half-cut bodies were practised as early as the sixth century BC.

Astodan burial rites – including statues - gained ground among the cattle-breeders in this era, while transitional burial still existed. The placing of astodan burials in the kurgans lasted until approximately the fifth century AD. Funeral rite show that by the early Middle Ages the Khwarezm, having made steps towards ethnic consolidation, had directly approached the formation of an ethnic entity.