The emotive force of early medieval mortuary practices

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Introduction
The last twenty years have seen increasingly sophisticated social interpretations of early medieval furnished burial rites, regarding them as the results of theatrical performances by which the living negotiated their shared social identities and social memories in relation to the dead. While studies have begun to engage with the significance of deploying embodied actions, technologies and multi-sensuous materials culture in commemorating the early medieval dead, this paper argues that the ‘emotive force’ of death rituals have yet to be fully explored. It is argued that the recent focus on the symbolic role of artefacts in creating a burial ‘tableau’, while beneficial in many ways, has tended to encourage static and emotionless interpretations of mortuary and commemorative practices in early medieval societies.

Focusing on the sequence of acts involved in composing and closing graves, it is possible to argue that emotive force was orchestrated to render the funeral memorable and structure traditions of mortuary commemoration. Evidence from the sixth-century inhumation weapon graves from West Heslerton, North Yorkshire will be employed in support of this revised view of death, memory and material culture in early medieval Britain.

The Grave as Ritual Tableau
Early medieval mortuary practices can be regarded as multi-vocal symbolic performances by the living in response to, and interacting with, selective aspects of the deceased’s identity including age, gender, status, kinship, household and ethnicity (e.g. Härke 1997a & b). Artefacts, materials, structures and the body were orchestrated and ‘composed’ during a public display culminating in the creation of a ritual tableau within the grave. The grave was hence a ‘text’ to be ‘read’ by survivors. Carver (2000) has noted the strengths of this textual analogy but has qualified it in relation to the ‘princely’ burials at Sutton Hoo by suggesting that early medieval funerals were more akin to poetic performances:

“A grave is not simply a text, but a text with attitude, a text inflated with emotion…like poetry it is a palimpsest of allusions, constructed in a certain time and place.” (Carver 2000: 37).

Halsall (2003) has also qualified this view of graves as texts drawing upon written and archaeological evidence for Merovingian furnished burials. In this view, early medieval funerals involve texts, words and acts culminating in the creation of memorable ‘scenes’ composed by survivors within the grave that portrayed the deceased’s identity in a stylised fashion (Halsall 2003: 62-3; 68). Importantly, Halsall emphasises the brevity of these ‘scene-making’ displays as central to their mnemonic efficacy. By prioritising the agency of the living and the political context of the symbolic expressions of mortuary ritual, this perspective has encouraged a range of different studies of early Anglo-Saxon mortuary practices (e.g. Lucy 1998; 2002; for a review see Dickinson 2002). However, despite Carver recognising that funerals were likely to have been ‘inflated with emotion’ (Carver 2000: 37), there have been limited
theoretical engagement with the emotive qualities of early medieval mortuary practices and their commemoratory roles.

**Mortuary Transformation in the Grave**
The reason for this lack of consideration of the emotive force of mortuary practices concerns the recent emphasis upon the tableau composed in the grave and the symbolic messages it was intended to communicate. This approach has numerous problems with it (see Williams 2006: 117-44), but for the purpose of this paper we can cite the emphasis it places on the creation of a static visual display rather than the shifting multi-sensory performance of both composing and subsequently closing off experience of the cadaver by the mourners. We can consider how the handling of the corpse and the deployment of material culture in transforming the body through the mortuary process was an important mechanism by which bereavement was expressed and social memories negotiated. If we instead consider the tableau as simply one stage in a succession of images and transformations that the living performed upon the cadaver, we can appreciate both display and concealment in the selective remembering and forgetting the early medieval dead.

**Emotions & Mortuary Practices**
Social anthropologists have frequently emphasised the necessity for moving away from a view of funerals as closed ritual systems towards an appreciation of the socially-mediated expression and representation of bereavement. In particular, we can cite studies that emphasise the different cultural engagements with the cadaver itself as an inspiration for the evocation of a range of emotions from veneration and sorrow to anger and fear (Rosaldo 1988). These emotions are often mediated and orchestrated through the careful and selective management of the mourner’s multi-sensory interactions with the corpse at each stage of the funeral (see Kus 1992).

Corporeal technologies (such as excarnation or cremation), bodily gestures (such as washing and dressing the corpse), all manner of material culture (from drinking a toast to the dead to wrapping the body in a shroud) can serve to create specific engagements between select mourners and the corpse. Such interactions, some intimate and personal, others theatrical and stylised, may serve to punctuate and regulate the emotional tempo to facilitate the ‘journey’ of the living and the dead through the transition of the funeral (e.g. Hertz 1960; Metcalf & Huntingdon 1991). These in turn can influence the construction of social memories of the dead among the survivors.

The emotive force of mnemonic practices can vary considerably within and between different societies with contrasting expressions of grief and attitudes and responses to the death and the dead (e.g. Danforth 1982; Parker Pearson 1999a; Serematakis 1991). Moreover, the unpredictability of the funeral in dealing with the sensory and corporeality of the dead can be as much as any expected formulaic ritual procedures. This is because each cadaver can respond in unexpected ways to the mortuary process that it is subject to (Williams 2004). Furthermore, all manner of practical and social factors can create complications to the care-free transition of the deceased from dangerous ghost to benign ancestor (see Connor 1995).

For archaeologists, it may not be possible to reconstruct the myriad of emotional responses to bereavement and their varied cultural manifestations including fear and
anger, sorrow and joy. However, the emotive force of these sensory interactions is something that it may be possible to theorise. This is because archaeologists have at their disposal the very contexts, albeit partial and fragmentary, of repeated mortuary treatments of cadavers using actions, technologies and material culture within which emotive forces are generated and enhanced the remembrance of the dead.

Emotive Force in Mortuary Archaeology

In the last decade, a number of archaeologists have attempted to deal with the emotional context of mortuary practices and its impact on social memory. For instance, Lynn Meskell has addressed the significance of the funerary process, the treatment and provision of artefacts with the dead and the commemorative spaces of tomb and home in New Kingdom Egypt (Meskell 1996; 1998; 2003). Sarah Tarlow’s study of post-medieval death and commemoration in Orkney considers the changing metaphors used to express bereavement focusing primarily on mortuary monumentality (Tarlow 1997b; 1999). Both Meskell and Tarlow briefly address the treatment of the cadaver as an emotive process of bereavement and commemoration (Meskell 1996; Tarlow 2002). Equally, Zoë Crossland has considered in relation to the forensic excavation of graves of Argentina’s ‘disappeared’ how the treatment of human remains can elicit strong and politicised emotional responses among relatives of the dead (Crossland 2000). However, for the purposes of this paper, Liv Nilsson-Stutz (2003) discussion of the embodied practices related to mortuary practices from late Mesolithic southern Scandinavia provides the most detailed and insightful discussion to date for addressing the link between emotion and social memory in the ritual practices surrounding the variability in the treatment of the cadaver in past societies. She argues that the emotional engagements with the dead focused on the abjection of the corpse and were mediated by technologies and material culture. In turn, these practices involving different postures for the cadaver and disposal methods influenced traditions of mortuary practice and commemoration over time, both creating ‘normative’ modes of disposal but facilitating the generation of alternative disposal methods to allow mourners to cope with ‘bad’ and ‘special’ deaths.

These approaches have not been without their critics, including being accused of imposing Western expectations of emotional responses onto past people’s experiences of mortuary ritual (Parker Pearson 1999b: 104). However, if we move away from attempting to reconstructing sentimental emotions towards the roles of technologies and material culture in negotiating the emotive force of funerary processes, we can consider the potential of this insight for understanding a wide range of early medieval mortuary evidence. Examples might include a more detailed consideration of the deliberate state-evocation of fear in the grisly and public executions and burial of criminals (Reynolds 2002), the emotive forces influencing the differential treatment of different age and gender groups in death (Stoodley 1999) or acts of fragmentation or violence done to corpses in attempts to disperse the pollution of death (Artelius 2005). Equally, the deliberate disturbance of old graves (see Tarlow 1997a) and expressions of veneration and adoration during the exhumation of the relics of saints (Karkov 2003) are contexts in which emotions configured the experience and commemoration of the dead. The widespread placing of drinking vessels in Merovingian and early Anglo-Saxon graves might, in part, represent acts of bereavement and commemoration in themselves as well as hinting at the importance of consumption in evoking emotional responses and social memories in mortuary contexts (Effros 2002). Likewise, in a previous paper this writer explored the experiential engagement of the
living with the impact and ‘agency’ of the cadaver upon survivors during early Anglo-Saxon cremation rituals (Williams 2004). Among these potential lines of enquiry, for the purposes of this paper we will focus on the emotive forces generated in the early Anglo-Saxon weapon burial rite.

**Weapon Burial Rites at West Heslerton, North Yorkshire**

Excavations near West Heslerton in North Yorkshire by Christine Haughton and Dominic Powlesland (1999a & b) uncovered part of an early medieval cemetery that focused upon a prehistoric monumental complex (Haughton & Powlesland 1999a: 9-11). Despite the truncated graves containing poorly preserved human remains (see Haughton & Powlesland 1999a: 14-22), the quality of the excavations and the excavation report have made the cemetery influential in recent discussions of migration, ethnicity and social organisation in later fifth and sixth-century Anglo-Saxon England (Budd et. al. 2004; Lucy 1998; 2002; Montgomery et. al. 2005).

At West Heslerton, there is considerable variability in terms of grave size and shape, orientation (although most were oriented with heads to the west), burial posture (including supine, flexed, crouched interments as well as prone and bound individuals), the provision of grave structures (coffins and other organic stains were recognised in some graves) and grave goods (organic remains did not usually survive but dress accessories and grave goods were uncovered: Haughton & Powlesland 1999a: 87-92). These varied in relation to the age and sex of the deceased as discussed by Sam Lucy (see Lucy 1998; 2002). The cemetery seems to have had multiple foci, possibly developing in family or household groups in discrete clusters around the prehistoric monuments (Haughton & Powlesland 1999a: 93-96; Lucy 1998).

In the necessarily brief consideration here we will focus upon themes in the burial process to argue that a balance was struck between composition and display on the one hand, and transformation and fragmentation on the other, serving in the mediation of the emotive force of the cadaver and promoting the commemoration of the dead. We can identify this theme best in the weapon burial rites at West Heslerton.

The weapon burial rite varies between cemeteries and regions and shifts over time, but overall Heinrich Härke has made the influential argument that the ritual deposition of weapons in graves was a multi-vocal symbolic statement alluding to the identity of the deceased as well as a form of myth-making for the survivors (Härke 1990; 1997a). The weapons in graves at West Heslerton were found in a variety of combinations, with a spear or spears, sometimes interred with a shield and/or most rarely with a sword. As in other cemeteries, upon osteological examination most weapon burials appear to have reached adulthood and most were confirmed as adult males (but see below). What is equally clear is that West Heslerton’s sixth-century weapon burials involved the mnemonic transformation of the dead rather than the symbolic representation of the deceased’s social identity.

The weapon burials were mostly clothed and postured for burial in a flexed or supine position in graves just large enough to contain the body. While the grave-plans from the cemetery report appear to suggest that the dead were ‘on display’, there was evidence of organic linings (perhaps log-cut coffins) in certain graves (e.g. grave 73; Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 110 – FIGURE 1) as well as evidence of linings over the body that would have hidden the body from view before the back-filling of the
grave (e.g. grave 85: Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 135). Hence the graves afforded a context of brief display but also intimate engagements and the successive enclosure of the cadaver.

The frequency of small graves with flexed burials at West Heslerton might be taken as evidence of lazy grave-diggers, but it might be argued that we are looking here at a conscious choice of the survivors to place the dead in a confined space and wrapped in place. Indeed, the wealthiest burials were contained in graves so short that a supine posture was not feasible.

A further outcome of these small graves was the role and treatment of the weapons in relation to the cadaver. Certainly we can imagine that the artefacts were used in mortuary displays prior to burial, perhaps only a portion of a wider assemblage, many of which were subsequently circulated among the mourners. Moreover weapons could have been imbued with a ‘fame’ linked to the identities of their commissioners, makers and successful use rendering them powerful but also potentially polluting items in the funerary context (see Williams 2005). Against this background it is notable that some of the deposited weapons appear to have been broken, seemingly deliberately for burial. Shields and swords may have been decommissioned in this way but it is the spearheads that provide the clear-cut evidence. In instances where spearheads were found by the heads of the skeletons (e.g. graves 85 and 155 - Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 135 & 273) and for graves where the spearhead was found towards the centre of the grave (e.g. graves 144 and 184 - Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 249 & 326) the graves were simply too small for the weapons to have been intact.

Some of the above instances of spearhead location might be explained away by post-depositional disturbance and other explanations by the possibility that spears were placed in the grave at an angle or even thrown into the grave (see Price 2002: 139). However other graves from West Heslerton provide even more conclusive of weapon-fragmentation. In weapon grave 73 the spearhead and ferrule were in correct alignment, but too close to each other to suggest they represent a whole and unbroken weapon (Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 110 – FIGURE 1). Meanwhile, in grave 151 the positions of two spearheads above the head of a supine adult aged between 25 and 35 suggest that only fragments of the shafts (if indeed any shafts remained attached to the spearheads at all) were included with them. Also close to the head were found an iron ferrule of a spear wrapped in a fleece with a horn-handled iron knife adjacent to the two spears. Again this suggests that either the spear-shaft was completely detached and placed in the grave or destroyed elsewhere (Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 261-62 - FIGURE 2). The act of breaking the spears could be regarded as a purely prosaic and practical act to facilitate their internment. Yet both the fragmenting of the weapons and the act of their placing in the grave can be regarded as emotive gestures by the survivors, as important as the tableau created with the cadaver itself.

This argument in turn provides a new perspective on those burials at West Heslerton purported by Lucy (1997) to be sexed by osteological methods as females and interred with weapons. This occasional phenomenon can be viewed in a number of ways: as evidence of female-warriors, ritualised roles taken on by selective adult females, evidence of a third-gender in early Anglo-Saxon society or more prosaically as evidence for the re-use of a weapon as a female-gendered artefact or simply a
misattribution of osteological sexing. Yet in the light of the evidence above, graves such as 151 (FIGURE 3) that contained an individual sexed as sexed as female where the spearhead was found placed over the left thigh of the body, it is possible that the weapon’s gender attribution was secondary to the gesture of its placing by a mourner. The act of breaking and placing the weapon was an emotive act expressing relationships between the living and the dead, not simply a statement of the deceased’s social identity (see Tarlow 2002).

The location of shields in the grave cannot be used to prove these objects were deliberately broken, but they equally cast doubt upon their role in simply creating a tableau. The shields are likely to have been striking artefacts adorned with shining and brightly decorated surfaces. However, their placing in the graves was less about a created composition and instead involved the complete covering of the head, torso or legs of the cadaver with only a few instances of the shield placed on its side at the grave’s edge to allow the corpse to remain in view. The shields seem to have been placed at a higher level than the body and may therefore be viewed less as part of a grave composition and more as an element of the closure of the grave in which the body was taken out of sight. This is evident, for example, in the position of the shield boss adjacent to the head of the flexed adult male aged between 25 and 30 years interred in grave 72 with two spearheads, a knife and a shield lying over the skull (Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 107). When we consider the possibility that spears, shields and swords were themselves sheathed or wrapped and therefore not fully on display in the burial tableau, we move further from a consideration of grave goods as concerning primarily with static visual representation.

The clustering of weapon burials in one area of the site suggests the possibility that each interment was a response to the memory of earlier graves, probably still visible by their mounds or grave-markers. While precise sequence of graves is difficult to discern because of limited inter-cutting (itself evidence of the recognition of existing grave-locations), it can be argued that the image produced temporarily in each weapon burial encouraged attempts at innovative replication in subsequent funerals (see Williams 2006: 42-65). This is best seen in cluster A in the southern half of the excavation (Haughton & Powlesland 1999a: 94-96) where a ‘string’ of weapon burials were recognised (Haughton & Powlesland 1999a: 85 - FIGURE 4). Each burial varied in the combination of weapons interred but each was a permutation upon the same theme. In particular, burials G72, G73 and G74 were placed head-to-head with the bodies in comparable flexed postures despite different weapon combinations (two on the right side, one on the left side: Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 107-115). Both the display and transformation of the cadavers during each discrete funerary event rendered them memorable and encouraged subsequent graves to respond to them through measures of similarity and difference in burial procedure (see Chapman 2000).

The emotive power of the mortuary process is equally relevant when examining those graves where a ‘tableau’ was denied in death by mourner’s affording a distinctive burial postures and curtailing grave furnishings. At West Heslerton, this applies to a series of skeletons in prone or bound postures. Whether these represent sacrifices, criminals, witches or simply individuals who died in unusual or distinctive circumstances who were denied the burial procedures of other community members, it is likely that their burial is not explicable as simply disrespect. Instead, it is argued
that the placing of large stone blocks over the grave of a female child in grave 154 (Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 271) or the placing of the body of a subadult aged between 15 and 20 in a prone position with the legs seemingly tied behind her back in grave 132 (Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 223 – FIGURE 5) suggest strongly that these were feared individuals whose treatment served to both render their funerals different, denying the image of death and physically retraining the dead in their graves. By analogy with later medieval literary evidence, it is tempting to regard these as potential revenant graves their posture and binding serving as attempts to contain the dead within their grave (eg Artelius 2005).

This argument is not incompatible with regarding their deaths as caused by judicial execution or sacrificial killing, but it does not depend on this assumption. Indeed, this interpretation of image-denied graves can be extended to the supposed ‘live burial’ from grave 41 at the nearby and contemporary cemetery at Sewerby, East Yorkshire. Here a clothed adult female was found sprawled prone in a shallow grave-cut overlying an earlier supine extended and wealthily furnished female burial in grave 49. It remains questionable that this was a ‘live burial’ as the excavator suggested, yet the individual certainly had a stone placed over the shoulder-blades and a fragment of quernstone placed on her lower back perhaps as a gesture to prevent her from rising as a revenant (Hirst 1985; see also Williams 2006: 96-100). Whatever the precise circumstance of the death of the occupant of grave 41 it is possible that such ‘deviant’ burials were not primarily means of insulting or punishing the dead since their placement in communal cemeteries suggests that these were individuals that retained the respect and support of the community. Instead it might be possible to regard them as the response of mourners unable to manage the abject emotions caused by the death. Perhaps when the orchestrated transformation of the dead failed, the cadaver required distinctive, perhaps sometimes improvised, mortuary provisions to deal with the situation. As much as the ‘normative’ provision of grave goods, these burials defined socially-accepted strategies for grieving and commemorating the dead.

**Discussion**

If this paper were to broaden out the discussion to other early Anglo-Saxon cemeteries, it would be possible to discuss more varied ways in which the emotive force of the funerary process was mediated by the posturing and adornment of the body, the interment of artefacts and the different uses of inhumation and cremation technologies (Williams 2006). Yet for the purposes of this short article, we have seen how the graves at West Heslerton illustrate that furnishing graves was an emotive performance.

Placing the emphasis on mnemonic transformation rather than symbolic display makes a lot of sense when addressing the different types of burial rite encountered in the early medieval archaeological record. The early Anglo-Saxon cremation process certainly involved the composition of a tableau upon the pyre of the dressed and adorned body, but this was rapidly followed by the cremation, collection of the ashes and consignment of the ashes within an urn in a communal cemetery (Williams 2004). The argument is equally appropriate for early medieval furnished inhumations including those from Snape in Suffolk where the excellent preservation of organic remains and detailed and careful excavation techniques show the complex sequence of ritual acts involved in composing and closing burials (Filmer-Sankey & Pestell 2001; Williams 2006: 123-34). The same argument can even be applied to the very richest
princely graves where the tableau approach appears to work best at a cursory glance. This is because the wealth chamber-graves at Prittlewell and mound 1 at Sutton Hoo involved the covering and consignment of objects and structures in an elaborate sequence rather than simply a single-stage extravagant display (Carver 2000; Williams 2006: 135-41). Therefore, early medieval funerals were variable mnemonic transformations brought about through display and monumentality but also through disposal and (sometimes) fragmentation and destruction (Küchler 1999).

**Conclusion**

Robert Hertz (1960) argued that death was a process not an event. Yet still archaeologists are seduced into regarding complex mortuary procedures as static mortuary displays. Through a brief consideration of the evidence from West Heslerton, it is argued that early medieval furnished burial was not primarily concerning the brief symbolic display of the deceased’s idealised identity using the deployment of grave goods to create a *tableau*. The funerals were undoubtedly public events aimed at an audience beyond the immediate family, but they also involved intimate engagements with the cadaver and artefacts involving gestures and technologies that created emotive force by transforming the dead, facilitating the selective remembering and forgetting of the dead person by the community through the ritual process. Archaeologists cannot dig up early medieval emotions, but the emotive force of practical actions in the West Heslerton weapon burials can be regarded as an importance mechanism by which early medieval social memories were produced and reproduced.

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**Figures**

Figure 1 Grave 73 from West Heslerton contained an elderly adult and evidence of a coffin. The positions of the spearhead and ferrule suggest that the weapon was broken prior to deposition (redrawn by Brynmor Morris after Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 110).

Figure 2 Grave 151 from West Heslerton containing an adult with two spearheads, a ferrule and a knife by the head suggesting from their position that they were broken before being placed in the grave (redrawn by Brynmor Morris after Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 261).

Figure 3 Grave 144 from West Heslerton containing an adult with a spearhead that from its position must have been broken when placed in the grave. Evidence of mineralised plant material adhering to the spearhead suggested to the excavator that the grave was covered with straw. Notably, the osteological report suggested this was a female skeleton raising questions over whether the artefacts were primarily present to denote the identity of the deceased (redrawn by Brynmor Morris after Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 249).
Figure 4  Plan of the central area of the West Heslerton Anglo-Saxon cemetery focusing upon prehistoric monumental complex. The distribution of weapon burials and the combinations of swords, spears and shields found in each grave are denoted (redrawn after Haughton & Powlesland 1999a: 85).

Figure 5  Grave 132 from West Heslerton containing a sub-adult in a prone position. The body had been dressed for death with female-gendered artefacts including brooches, beads and pendants. A purse by the pelvis contained latchlifters and a walnut amulet. A (wooden?) cup was placed by the head indicated by a surviving copper alloy band (redrawn by Brynmor Morris after Haughton & Powlesland 1999b: 223).

References


