

The Archaeology of Burial Mounds. Theory and Interpretation

by Douglas Bailey

Introduction

Burials are expressive statements of ideology, politics, economy and social reality. Burial mounds are especially successful bases for making powerful, far-reaching and durable statements. Because they are so successful as bases for statements. Burial mounds become the foci of attention and action in struggles between rival ideologies. The interpretation of the practice of bi-ritualism is found in this struggle over the use of burial mounds as a basis for social statements.

In the present paper I will do three things. First I will provide a very brief, and very selective, review of the ever increasing body of literature on the archaeological interpretation of burial. Second I will suggest how progress can be made in developing a rigorous interpretation of burial mounds. Third, and finally, I shall apply such an interpretation method on the early iron age practice and bi-ritualism.

The major goals of this paper therefore, are to place the burial practice recovered from the archaeological record into its corresponding social context and to offer some comment on the meaning of bi-ritualism. To reach the latter goal I will call upon an example from the second phase of the early iron age in southern Bulgaria (Gergova 1989). Before turning to bi-ritualism, I offer a brief review of the more important and relevant developments in the archaeological interpretation of the mortuary record.

Theory and interpretation of burial: a brief and selective review

The burial record is a major source of information about extinct societies. Burials contain three types of information which are valuable for archaeologists who intend to reconstruct ancient societies:

1. Information about the physical condition of the deceased and about ancient demography.
2. Information about the statuses of individual and the structure and organization of society.
3. Information about ancient perspectives of death and the burial. It is latter two types of information which I wish to review here.

Social structure and organization

One of the most important contributions to the development of the archaeological study of burial remains was made in the 1960s and 1970s by the "New Archaeologists". This contribution was the use the use of burial remains to recognize individual identities form burials and to use these identities to reconstruct the structure and organization of particular ancient societies.

The distinction between social organization and social structure is paramount to understanding the interpretation of burial remains. The American archaeologist Joseph Tainter expressed it most clearly: The *structure* of a system, such as a society or community, is the number and the nature of components within the system and the articulation of these components. On the other

hand, the *organization* of a system is the range of constraints imposed on the behavior of the system's components (Tainter 1978: 131).

Thus the structure of the burial community consists of *components of the community*, the individuals (or groups of individuals) in the mortuary record as well as the relationship between these individuals.

The organization of the burial community is the set of *rules and rituals* which dictates the particular components which are appropriate to be included in the burial record and the way in which these components are arranged.

The individual and its identity

The distinguished American archaeologist Lewis Binford applied and expanded the ideas of the social anthropologist Goodenough to illuminate the study of the *individual* in the burial record. Goodenough had suggested that individual have two identities. On the one hand each individual had a *personal identity* which contained those specific characteristics and features which most clearly identified each individual.

On the other hand each individual had a social identity which consisted of characteristics and features which document the relationship of the individual to the society within which he or she lived.

Binford adapted these ideas to archaeology and suggested that in order to identify the individuals of an extinct society and the discover the status of each individual in a society, the archaeologist should view the burial record as a direct reflection of that society's life (Binford 1971).

According to such reasons, the discovery of buried individual with a disproportionate amount of *valuable grave-goods* represented a wealthy or socially important individual: the king or prince' grave, for example. Furthermore, the discovery of a *series* of individual burials with high densities of

valuable grave-goods represents a group of leaders or chiefs. An accompanying series of less well off (or completely empty) burials represented the lower class elements of a community. Theories of *ranked* or *egalitarian* societies quickly follow such reconstructions.

Binford's assumption that the burial record, as recovered by the archaeologists, was a direct reflection of the relevant societies structure and organization has influenced much archaeological work and thinking on the interpretation of burial (Saxe 1971; Goldstein 1976; Tainter 1978).

In the period since Binford's seminal work in the 1960s and 1970s a group of archaeologists have *criticized* the assumption that the burial record is a direct reflection of the identities, origination and structure present during the lifetime of the deceased. This school of interpretation has been influenced by sociologists and social anthropologists whose studies of ethnographic and modern western industrialized mortuary practice have documented the ways in which *burial practice is used as a ritual by societies to influence the living population* (Bloch 1971; Goody 1962).

A good example of the criticism of the burial-as-reflection model comes from a study of twentieth century Britain where a ranked society exists and which a future archaeologist would surely uncover. However, if the future archaeologist tried to reconstruct the structure of twentieth century society from the burial record she would provide a grossly *inaccurate* picture. For although Britain is a clearly ranked society with distinct levels of ranking (e.g., upper class, middle class, lower class), *all* these levels are not represented in the burial record. The upper class (i.e., members of parliament, the directors of large companies, high-ranking military officers, leaders of the various religions and high ranking judge) *chose not to display their position or status* in burial ritual. Indeed, following the reflective model, the future archeologists would miss this class altogether.

In an incisive and seminal study of east Anglian burial custom during the 1950s and 1960s Mike Parker Pearson has shown that the burials upon which the greatest effort was expended were the graves of gypsies and showmen (i.e., circus performers) (Parker Pearson 1982). Neither gypsies nor showmen are upper class groups in modern British society. Pearson argues that the *apparently wealthy* burials of gypsies and showmen are best understood in the *context of the social competition* which existed between the two groups. Gypsies and showmen used burial ritual to publicly display their attempts to outdo each other. They used the burial ritual *to influence what other people thought about them* in Pearson's view, burials can be very *misleading* guides to social structure.

Pearson's work and the work of other archaeologists and social anthropologists have shown that death and the rituals surrounding death are *socially powerful events*. Death is a point of *transition* which is *mediated and distorted by the interest and ideology of the society concerned* (Goody 1962; Bloch 1971). *It is not*, as Binford had proposed, a direct representation of the social structure and organization of ancient life.

Ancient perception and uses of death and burial

The treatment of the deceased by the living (for this is what the ceremony and act of burial is) is *above all else a ritual event*. Furthermore, the rite of burial is, as Parker Pearson found among the gypsies and showmen, a powerful context for making *public statements*. Indeed one could go farther and say that burials are nothing more than statements. These statements are often *misleading mis-representations* of the corresponding reality. Burial therefore is an *arena or stage* for the public display and promotion of, not only the status quo (i.e., what is actually happening in society) but also, and perhaps more interestingly, *alternative and subversive* ideologies and customs.

Burials as statements

If one accepts that burials are *statements* and that the place and particular custom of burial are the contexts and mechanisms for making statements, two questions arise: 1) *what* statements are being made and 2) *why* are such statements being made?

In many instances the statements made by burial ritual are those of personal and social identity. In this sense, one follows Goodenough and Binford as mentioned above. In another sense, following Parker Pearson and his contemporaries, one must re-mould Binford's concept of identity display to make room for the possibility (I would argue the probability that the statements made about identity during burial are *not* always *direct* and truthful representations of an individual status as existed while that individual was alive.

In addition to statements about individual identity and status other statements made in burial refer to *ownership control and rites* to territory and related resources physically connected to the place of burial (see R. Chapman 1981). Again, in reality, these statements to access to land and resources may be nothing more than *claims* to ownership and control. Such claims use the ritual of burial to *legitimate and advertise* the statements of ownership and control of resources.

That the event and ritual of burial *can be used* to make such dishonest statements and claims answers the question *why* are such statements made: to *publicly* make a statements or claim in a *powerful social context*.

If burial is accepted as a powerfully charged ritual context for making claims on land and resources and political power, then it becomes clear that the archaeological study of burial ritual *must* consider (among others) *three* main reasons why burial statements were made: 1) to *establish* and *publicize* a particular social, economic or political ideology; 2) to *reassert, legitimize* and *maintain* an *existing* social, economic and

political ideology; or 3) to *take-over and assert a new and alternative* social, economic or political ideology.

What are burial mounds ?

Having in mind the preceding review of the study of burials and burial ritual, I now turn to the study of burial mounds. The *inception* of burial mounds is a significant development in the use of burials and burial rituals as statements of social, economic and political ideologies. As seen in light of the importance of *visibility and durability*, burial mounds are a 24-hour, non-stop transmitter of statements.

Burial mounds are extremely *successful* (*visible*) *imposing foci* for people's attention. Regardless of the context of the statements which they transmit, they are very *stable* vehicles for political, social and ideological statements. Their *stability* rests not only on the two critical variable mentions above (i.e., visibility and durability) but also on two *additional* factors.

The first additional factor is their *obvious, physical and permanent connection with the soil* of the territory they occupy. Especially when covered, burial mounds *are at one with the earth*; there is *no* separation between the deceased and the soil (and thus the territory) in which it is situated. There can be no stronger way *to claim rites and ownership* of local territory and resources than to use a burial mound in this way to make such a *visually undeniable connection* between individual (and undoubtedly, family, lineage or group) and landscape.

The second additional factor which makes burial mounds such stable vehicles for making social, economic, political and ideological statements is the fact that *burial mounds bring the statements of the mortuary ceremony into the everyday routine of the surviving populace*. As noted above in relation to the Neolithic practice of pit inhumations, the burial ritual was visible for a very short period of time. Thus whatever message the burial statement was intended to transmit, that message was *only* transmitted to those who attended the inhumation. There was *no*

lasting physical reminder of the message. There were no stele or mounds which could bring the message to the rest of the surviving local and visiting populace. In the Iron Age however, the burial mound acted to transmit the burial message to every person *day after day after day*. In the Neolithic the burial statement was *temporary* and only received by the limited (and probably select) portion of the population who attended (or were allowed to attend) the act of inhumation. In the Iron Age the burial statement became part of the routine of daily existence. *In fact its message and statement were inescapable*.

Interestingly, in its position as a *durable, stable, visible transmitter* of social, ideological, political and economic statements, the burial mound was vulnerable to *abuse* and appropriation. Thus if an individual or a group or individuals wished to *overturn* the existing ideology or political order (which was established and maintained through the use of a burial mound), there could be no more powerful way to do so than by *usurping control* of the burial mound and making a new set of statements. This indeed is what I noted above as the third main type of statements which could be made by a burial.

The question remains, *why* introduce the practice of making burial mounds. What can the archaeologist conclude about the appearance of this method of burial ? First, the introduction of focusing burial ritual around and within mounds be connected with attempts to increase the *size and range* of the audience able to receive the burial statement. Range was increased both across *time* (future audiences as well as those attending the burial itself), and *space* (all sections of the population including visiting as well as local groups).

The place of bi-ritualism in ritual

Having investigated the parameters of mound burials it is now possible to turn to the interpretation of a specific early Iron Age burial rite: bi-ritualism. By bi-ritualism, I refer to the practice of placing a burial of one particular ritual

or custom into a burial mound which contained an earlier primary burial of a *different* ritual or custom.

One *possible* interpretation of bi-ritualism is that the primary burial (identified with its particular rite) represents one culture group or population, while the intrusive secondary burial (with its different rite) represents a different culture group or population. In view of the interpretation of burial ritual and burial mounds offered above I suggested that an alternative explanation may be more probable.

The alternative follows from the reasoning that burial rituals and social, politics, ideological and economic statements and that in their position as successful stable bases for issuing statements, burial mounds were often the *targets* of campaigns by those promoting *alternative* ideologies. Thus, in bi-ritualism, the secondary burial represents not a different culture group but the actions of a *rival faction* from the same culture group. I suggest that the rival faction placed their burial (with its alternative rite) into the existing mound in order to *impose their ideology* over their compatriots and opponents.

Burial mounds as statements: conclusions and consequences

Burial mounds are statements involved in ongoing *negotiations* of local, regional and trans-regional political and ideological factions. They must be studied as such. Like other types of burial ritual, burial mounds *cannot* be read by

archaeologists as simple reflections of the extinct societies which built them. Burial mounds are *active*: they have an *effect* on those who see them and those who receive the statements which they constantly transmit. Because of their power to transmit ideological and political statements, burial mounds are often the focus of *struggles* between rival groups with a community, society or culture. The recover of events such as bi-ritualism documents such struggles between rival groups.

Burial *is but one* aspect of ancient (and modern) social realities. Social realities *are not* constant and straight forward; they are riven with *instability* and *conflict*. Bi-ritualism is one example of how archaeology has documented such conflict and ideological rivalry. In addition to burial ritual there are many other elements and strategies which are employed and which should be investigated by archaeologists who wish to study the inception of phenomena such as burial mounds. Therefore changes in burial ritual cannot be studied on their own; they must be allied with every other category of archaeologically recoverable information. Considering the evidence for the burial record with the rest of the material record of ancient social realities will be a fundamental advance for the modern archaeological investigation of ancient society. The result of such a study will illuminate more of the details of the social tension and struggles which document our prehistoric and historic past. It is a result worth working towards and fighting for.

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