



# Mortality

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## Introduction: The materiality and spatiality of death, burial and commemoration

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Materiality is more than simple matter void of meaning or relevance. It is charged with significance, and has symbolic and interpretative value, perhaps even a form of selfhood. This is particularly true concerning the materiality of death. The physical properties of things have consequences for how objects are used or perceived. Human remains are a very particular matter; they represent a specific form of *recalcitrant* objects, because they literally *remain* and request explicit care in designated environments. Indeed, death, dying and burial produce artefacts and occur in spatial contexts. These contexts are organised in terms of a spatiality that depends on a society's 'choices of activities and its technical mastery. Spatiality is analysed on basis of the main components of the working of territories, namely appropriation, habitat, circulation, exploitation (or production) and administration (or management)' (Pumain, 2004). Spatiality, as the condition of being spatial, is understood here as having volume, i.e. three-dimensionality – taking up space and providing the context that permits and shapes such interactions with things. This idea is at the heart of this special issue. Thus, artefacts, mementos and memorials are conceptualised as exteriorised, materialised and spatialised forms of human activity. They can be understood as cultural forms that seek to sustain social life as a form of bonding beyond physical death. However, they are also the medium through which values, ideas and criteria of social distinction are reproduced, legitimated or transformed to also distinguish between the deceased. The interplays between such materiality, spatiality and the bereaved who commemorate the dead was the focus of an international conference organised in March 2017 by the University of Luxembourg.<sup>1</sup> This special issue includes papers presented at that conference and others submitted in response to a subsequent call for papers for this journal.

### Shared insights into the materiality and the spatiality of death

Our focus on materiality pertains to haptical *things* which, in their physical existence, occupy a position in space. They also have a duration of time – a temporality. This angle has been recently explored as *materialities of passing*, which refers to the de facto handling of decaying matter 'and the vanishing of life through which the passage of time may be observed; with things passed on prior to dying, what the anticipation of

death and with the material forms with which people attempt to transcend or interact with the ultimate nothingness of those who have – or that which has – passed’ (Bjerregard, Rasmussen, & Flohr-Sørensen, 2016, p. 6).

This special issue takes its cue from James Deetz’s seminal *In small things forgotten* (1996), in which he addresses the seemingly plain objects of everyday life all around us, which can create meaning even after a long time has passed, breaking the ground for what has become historical archaeology. The relative overrepresentation of historical and archaeological contributions, while not intended by the editors, is in hindsight less surprising, given many archaeologists’ interest in the nexus of materiality and space, especially in interaction with humans, dead or alive. The focus on material remains and their evolving significance and relevance may also be linked to the work of Kenneth Foote (1997) on so-called landscapes of violence, i.e. spaces of past tragedies, and their changing meanings for future generations, or Sharon Macdonald’s (2008) research into the painful material architectural legacy of Nazi materiality and space at Nuremberg, which has yielded fascinating perspectives on what impacts such architecture have on people – still today. What emerges from these examples is that materiality of artefacts as well as the space they take do something to people. Things, space, the living and the dead are all intertwined. We may not always be aware of it, but this interrelationship is at the heart of who we are. Ian Hodder (2012) has called this relationship between humans and things *entangled*, and while his work sheds light on the complexity of this relationship, one may argue that it falls short of considering spatiality as an additional dimension.

When investigating the materiality and the spatiality of death, burial and commemoration, post-phenomenological research offers new perspectives. It refuses to be textuality-driven and is opposed to the object-centred nature of thinking (Ash & Simpson, 2014; Verbeek, 2005). Rather, things can be agents: ‘Like humans, objects can make things happen, but unlike humans, no alternative decisions are possible for them’ (Langer, 2010, p. 86). Thus, artefacts do more than fulfil their functions: they shape relationships, but don’t make them. Alfred Gell (1998) calls this property ‘secondary agency of the non-human world’. In such a world, there is a strong correlation between material things and space: objects are inherently spatially extent and their position in space – be it at random, be it on purpose – shape a place, for instance, a cemetery (Habermas, 1999, p. 77). Thus, in their individual sets of approaches, the so-called *material turn* and the *spatial turn* share a strong correlational denominator: the production of space as agency of things. A cemetery, to stay with our example, is not ‘a container space’, merely containing objects, but ‘a relational space’ (Maddrell & Sidaway, 2010; Woodthorpe, 2010, p. 121). It is a historically evolved spatiality that has become ‘reified in a series of sedimented enactments’ (Law, 2002, p. 96).

How can we disentangle this knot of spatial and temporal relationships? The authors suggest starting with the analysis of an *event horizon*, a stratigraphy of object-oriented events by archaeological means. The stratum doesn’t always need to be unburied, since it may belong to a present-time cemetery. According to Sørensen, an archaeology of contemporary material culture ‘does not so much pursue the intentions and perceived strategies of contemporary individuals. Its strengths instead reside in taking material forms seriously and allowing them to formulate implicit as well as explicit agendas, taking its point of departure in the affective agency of materials rather than the verbalized or written narratives of human agents’ (2010, p. 116). Thus, there is no

need to trowel a site's surface for isolating contexts; it is possible to establish sequences of grave object *sedimentation* without dissolving the context of this single surface by physical excavation. Old and brand-new graves share the same horizon, in which the old has never stopped being present. To paraphrase Heidegger, they are constantly *ready-to-hand* (*zuhanden sein*) for the grave owners, which makes them *present-at-hand* (*vorhanden*) for scientific analysis.

The cemetery, with its nested enclosures, is an entity that allows one to investigate 'material things as an ever-changing bundle of relations, to emphasize the way they are constantly fluid and in flux' (Fowler & Harris, 2015, p. 128) (compare Geismar & Horst, 2004 or Pels, Hetherington, & Vandenberghe, 2002), for two reasons: First, a typical cemetery contains this active surface fairly rigorously by its peripheral limits; second, this dynamic surface is subdivided into self-similar units of which the flux and flow can be charted, detected and correlated.

It could be hypothesised that the extraordinary space referred to as a cemetery, graveyard or burial ground is the result of the abovementioned multiple interrelationships between materiality and subjects (Streb, 2017). To study the constituting materiality and space, we suggest a multidata and multimethod approach that goes well beyond conventional historical archaeological research, a field typically very much concerned with this particular source of data. (Streb, Kolnberger, & Kmec, 2019).

## The materiality and spatiality of death, burial and commemoration

In this special issue, we deal with not just one but a multitude of *places* for the dead to reside, in whatever shape or form, beyond the consideration of simple grave artefacts on the one hand and graveyards as a space on the other. We present historical and contemporary examples of the nexus between mortal remains and their burial places, i.e. the corporeality of dead bodies in relationship to their specific locations. The area of investigation is mainly continental Europe – Germany and France).

Historically, the Christian belief in the Resurrection of the Flesh made a definite place of custody mandatory for mortal remains: the churchyard. Based on archaeological evidence, **Hauke Kenzler** describes the origins and development of medieval and post-medieval cemeteries in Germany. Burials as interments are ritual acts of location, the spatial fix of which is a key aspect of funeral customs. In this context, Kenzler points to convergences and divergences between the spatial and ceremonial orders of Catholic and Protestant traditions over time. Dead bodies of Christians were not simply inhumated; they were accompanied by various objects: coffins, clothing, grave goods that referred to the person as belonging to the mortal and ephemeral world, making the *naked* corpse complete before the eternal soul was to meet its maker.

In the area of investigation, charnel houses were part of any God's acre until the Reformation, at most until the Age of Enlightenment. **Elizabeth Craig-Atkins, Jennifer Crangle, P.S. Barnwell, Dawn M. Hadley, Allan T. Adams, Ian Atkins, Jessica-Rose McGinn** and **Alice James** offer new perspectives on this particular curation of human remains. The case study of a medieval parish church in England is unique, yet also sheds light on medieval channelling practices across Europe. The locations of the bone deposit

and the micro-location of bones within sacral architecture are interpreted here as secondary burial in the sense of a ritual, where the skeleton remains are sought to be placed – even at this stage – as closely as possible to the church altar.

Human bones have a special presence and agency, and not only to the mourner and prayer. They can be professionally *consumed* as objects of scientific investigation. Their affordance to examine and contextualise them make bodily remains irresistible objects, not only for osteoarchaeologists. While new ethical standards have fundamentally changed procedures, **Natalie Polzer** investigates the same agency as *consumption* by the *tourist gaze*. Her ethnographic approach further reveals the vicissitudes of the non-decaying corpses as an ongoing co-presence of the dead. In Polzer's interpretation, the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo (Sicily, 17th to late 19th century) as a place and its individual mummies work as a generator of cultural and social meaning. While mummies are a well-known solution to the problem of the decaying materiality of the human flesh, cremation represents the other extreme: the annihilation of any bodily form. Embalming takes an intermediate position.

**Anne Carol** links the rise of embalming to the rise of the modern cemetery and its multiplication of plot allocation. In France, the 1830s was the *golden age* of embalming. This technique of post mortem preservation prolonged the bodily familiarity of the deceased at his or her finest, while the new cemeteries became the place for mourning and the grave the spatial centre of the cult of the dead. Nowadays, it often seems as if materiality, at least in European context, is more an obstacle to be overcome than a quality to be preserved. However, following Carol's argumentation, it is not a paradox that the (current) rise in cremation rates (also in France) goes hand in hand with the renewed success of embalming.

**Philippe Charrier** and **Gaëlle Clavandier** explore the question what to do with bodily remains where there was no (independent) life. They distinguish between four categories: foetal death in utero, pregnancies terminated for medical reasons, late-term miscarriages and stillbirths (infants who are born alive but are not viable). These categories can be linked to different places foreseen for lifeless infants in today's French cemeteries.

The burial site remains important today, to administrators and the bereaved alike. Cremation transcends all types of limits. It has had a profound impact on burial location: the potential dispersion of 'sites'. In some cases, human ashes can even be transformed into new materiality such as synthetic diamonds, which make the remnants of a deceased hypermobile. **Anna-Katharina Balonier**, **Elizabeth Parsons** and **Anthony Patterson** investigate the limits of cemetery regulation of this development in Germany and the illusion of 'natural' burial.

**Thorsten Benkel** and **Matthias Meitzler** offer a sociological exploration of body and materiality. Based on practical research conducted on the thanatopractical environment (cemeteries, hospitals, hospices, forensic departments, and so on) in Central Europe, their theoretically well-informed contribution summarises approaches and perspectives on the nexus of bodily remains and their locations.

## Note

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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