

# Burial practices throughout the ages

Life



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Society has always looked for a way to honor its dead. This has been the case since the earliest of times. There are rituals in all populations that mark the various passages each travel through in life. For instance, we mark an individual's accomplishments in graduating from college, or getting married. It is no different in death. Death is the final passage that civilizations throughout history have found ways to honor. Burials and the ceremonies that commemorate them, offer the survivors an opportunity to pay homage to the life that has been lost.

It gives them a chance to celebrate the deceased for accomplishments, life and family. The burial ceremony allows the survivors a chance to mourn, and express their grief to others. The ceremony helps those left behind to heal from the pain of the loss. From the early civilizations to the present, burial rituals have told us a great deal about the social behavior of the population. In most cases, children and elderly were buried just the same as the younger, stronger male. That tells us that the population valued its people and grieved their loss.

In the middle and late Iron Age, burial practices reflected a diverse community. In the area that is now Britain, an individual was buried in two separate areas. For instance, there are areas where single bones are buried, as well as locations where the rest of the body is found. During the Iron Age, the breaking down of the human body indicated ritual activities. This was done at death or shortly after with the use of excarnation. Excarnation is allowing the body to be exposed until it reaches the skeleton stage. At that point, the cranium is usually first to separate from the body, followed by the feet and hands.

This process will usually involve the chopping of skin, or soft tissue (Redfern, 2008). Once body parts are separated, the secondary burial can be completed. The body processing also included breaking bones to remove joint cartilage. Archeologists have noticed that the bones found in secondary sites usually have cut marks, and fractures (Redfern, 2008). The Neanderthal was different in its method of dealing with the dead. In fact, the Neanderthal buried its dead in a painstaking ritual that occurred in stages with the consumption of the deceased person's body parts.

Nevertheless, the Neanderthal left gifts on the graves of those who died. Statistics indicate that 40 percent of the graves that archeologists have examined have been of the very old or very young. That fact indicates that the civilization valued both its elderly and children (Friedermann, Muller, Hemm, 2008). The burial practices of the pre-pottery Neolithic civilization found individuals buried in shallow graves. Some graves contained only one person while others contained many. Archeologists discovered 21 artifacts related to 15 graves in Atlit-Yam, on the Northern coast of Israel.

Most of the items were tools, axes, and other household items. The graves at this site were simple. There were a few secondary burial sites, as some skulls were detached from the body. The burial site was covered with lime plaster on its surface (Galili, Eshed, Goher, Hershkovitz, 2005). In the third millennium burial practices in the Oman peninsula feature tombs circular in shape with un-worked stone that had a single ring around it. The tomb had between two and ten chambers within it. One tomb at the site of Unar 1 was large enough to hold the bodies of 438 people.

A smaller tomb found at Unn an-Nar Island only held between 34-48 individuals. Inside of the tombs, archeologists found ceramics, soft-stone objects, bronze, beads and shells. These items and burial method indicates a collective manner of living. There were some cremations discovered in this period as well (Blau, 2001). A burial cave found in the Aleutian Islands dated back to 390 BD. gives a glimpse into the function of the society. Inside the cave were found hearths and work places. Human bones had arranged stones around them. There was an additional stone arrangement at the back of the cave.

In front of the cave, in the habitation area, animal bones and artifacts were found. The bodies were in a sarcophagus in wood or stone coffins. There is some discussion among scholars that cave burials may have been just for the better off (West, Lefevre, Corbett, Crockford, 2003). Burial rites in Sophocles' Athens featured the use of tombs more than cemeteries. The tombs are found along roads or at passageways or gates. Antigone believed that all people are entitled to burial. The words tumbos and herion mean mounds of the land that cover the deceased and mark where the individual is buried. The word, taphos means the tomb.

The grave or tomb generally was located in a public location. The idea that the dead should be separated in some way from those living is not a part of the Greek culture. However, late 5th century walls have been found that divide up tombs from one family to another. Monuments always face the street or public square. The Romans of the same era prohibited the burial of any individual within the city. (Patterson, 2006). Murders in this era were executed for their crime. After execution, they were stoned and thrown out

of the city without being buried. Suicide victims were buried but not provided a headstone.

People of good standing were given ceremonies that featured songs. Then they were placed in a decorated tomb (Patterson, 2006). Heroes and those killed in battle were given a public funeral with games, oration, and sacrifices. Solon devised the rules for burial in Athens. He said the deceased should be laid out within his home. The next day, he would be carried out of the house on the board he was laying on. When they carry the dead out, men will walk in the front of the procession. Women walk behind. In addition, no woman under age 60 could enter the chamber of the dead, or the tomb.

(Patterson, 2006). This is quite different from the days of Jesus where women were in charge of caring for the dead. In Medieval times there is a diverse burial rite found in the use of boats with regional and temporal variations found. The Sutton Hoo Mound is a large ship-type grave. Most of the boats used were dugout logboats. Some of the civilizations used boat timbers or boat parts to cover the grave area (Brooks, 2007). Scandinavia is well-known for its adoption of burial by boat. The Swedes and Norwegians practiced boat cremations; however, such is rare in Anglo-Saxon areas.

The exception to this is the site at Sutton Hoo Mound three. At that site there is a tree-trunk made like a coffin that was used for cremation (Brooks, 2007). By the time the 18th century came around, most people in England were buried in unmarked graves in a churchyard. The ground was consecrated and the service was performed by an Anglican clergyman. He used the book, “Book of Common Prayers” for the service. In 1689, however, the idea of personalized funerals and pre-planned ceremonies came into being. The

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more affluent bought coffins. This led to the development of the undertaker profession (Gitting, 2007).

The very affluent built themselves a mausoleum on their land. The most famous ceremony was for John Knill, the mayor of St. Ives. He established a trust and asked that a ceremony be performed every five years. The ritual featured ten girls, who were under the age of ten. It also featured two widows, the vicar, and mayor and customs officer. All paraded to the mausoleum on top of a hill. The ceremony featured dancing, and singing, “ Old Hundredth, “ All people that on earth do dwell” (Gitting, 2007). Ironically, the ceremony was last completed in 2006. After the American Civil War, the ideal of embalming became popular.

Prior to this Americans relied on the European methods established for the preservation of the body. The use of embalming gave family a chance to look at the person one last time and accept his or her death. Embalming was used after Lincoln’s death to allow him to lie in state for individuals to witness, (Funeral Industry, n. d. ) In conclusion, burial rites of differing civilizations tell us a story of how the people lived, as well as how they died. It explains their values, and speaks to the kind of society they lived within. For example, south of Cairo a 5,000 year old tomb was discovered.

Inside of the tomb archeologists found the bones of 10 donkeys. (Burial Site, 2008). This indicates the value this civilization placed on the role of the animals. Therefore, burial rites explain much about ancient civilizations, but also tell us a great deal about ourselves. Although the rituals may have changed, the overall purpose is the same and that is to honor the dead.

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