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DEATH WARMED UP

The Agency of Bodies and Bones in Early Anglo-Saxon Cremation Rites

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Abstract

It is argued that recent archaeological theories of death and burial have tended to overlook the social and mnemonic agency of the dead body. Drawing upon anthropological, ethnographic and forensic analogies for the effects of fire on the human body, together with Gell's theory of the agency of inanimate objects, the article explores the cremation rites of early Anglo-Saxon England. As a case study in the archaeological study of the mnemonic agency of bodies and bones it is suggested that cremation and post-cremation rites in the 5th and 6th centuries AD in eastern England operated as technologies of remembrance. Cremation encouraged distinctive forms of engagement with the physicality and materiality of the dead. It is argued that cremated bodies and ashes need to be theorized as more than osteo-logical data, artefacts or symbolic resources, but as holding material agency influencing the selective remembering and forgetting of the deceased's personhood.

Key Words ◆ agency ◆ Anglo-Saxon ◆ cremation ◆ death ◆ memory

INTRODUCTION

Archaeological studies of mortuary practices have undergone many theoretical changes in recent decades following the shifting paradigms of processual, post-processual and interpretative archaeologies. Moving beyond studies of social structure, symbolism and ideology, many recent studies of death and burial in archaeology have developed discussions of emotion, memory, identity and personhood (e.g. Barrett, 1994; Chapman, 2000; Fowler, 2001; Hamilakis, 1998; Jones, 2003; Meskell,

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1996, 2003; Mizoguchi, 1993; Parker Pearson, 1999; Tarlow, 1999; Thomas, 2002). However, there remains an outstanding theoretical issue with current approaches. While mortuary archaeology has frequently focused on the dead body's treatment, elaboration and representation through material culture, the materiality of the dead body itself has received less attention. At worst, the human body is regarded as a source of objective osteological data that can be extracted by scientific analysis. At best, bodies and bones are seen as invested with symbolic meanings and used as strategic resources deployed in social and political discourses in the past (e.g. Barrett, 1994; Pader, 1982). Yet although the archaeology of the body has become a popular and much-debated topic, these discussions have tended to focus upon the agency of the living body, its physicality, perception and engagement with material culture and architecture, rather than the agency of the dead body itself (but see Fowler, 2002: 48; Meskell, 1996; Tarlow, 2002).

This mourner-centred approach to past mortuary practices by recent archaeological theories is implicit in the often repeated dictum of archaeologists that 'the dead do not bury themselves' (e.g. Thomas, 1999; Tilley, 1996). The emphasis on the agency of the living has had the positive effect of seeing mortuary practices as a 'field of discourse' for the living (Barrett, 1994; Parker Pearson, 1999) rather than a direct reflection of the social organization of the living (for critiques see Härke, 1997; Samson, 1987). These approaches rightly promote mortuary practices as a context for socio-political display, competition and legitimization by the survivors and participants (Barrett, 1994; Halsall, 1998). However, one weakness with this approach is to down-play the centrality of the cadaver as a focus for personhood and remembrance of the dead in mortuary practices (see also Fowler, 2001; Meskell, 1996; Tarlow, 1999). This is ironic at a time when students of material culture are challenging the division between the world of people and artefacts and there are frequent discussions of artefacts and monuments with 'biographies' and forms of agency (e.g. Knappett, 2002). In contrast, the dead body which might be claimed to be intrinsically situated as being both 'person' and 'object', is understood only as a set of materials without agency or the ability to affect the actions and perceptions of the living. It can be argued that the recent focus on the 'agency' of the living in mortuary practices fails to appreciate the close entanglement of the living with the dead in many societies (e.g. Hertz, 1960; Metcalf and Huntington, 1991; Parker Pearson, 1993). In turn it underestimates the complex engagements between people (both living and dead) and material culture in the production and transformation of social practices and structures. It might also be argued that the focus on the agency of the living in recent studies is predicated on the assumption that past societies viewed death as a biological event and perceived the body and the individual as whole

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and bounded units – concepts that have frequently been shown to be unique to western modernity. These views are potentially irrelevant to past communities with different conceptions of death, the body and personhood (see Fowler, 2001; Thomas, 2002: 31–4). Consequently, although discussions of 'ancestors' and an 'ancestral presence' have been employed widely in recent archaeological research (e.g. Edmonds, 1999; see Whitley, 2002), it is suggested that recent archaeological studies of death and burial have tended to perpetuate, rather than challenge, the hegemony of the living over the dead in understanding past mortuary practices. Indeed, we might venture to suggest that the tendency of archaeologists to see the dead body as simply another form of material culture manipulated by the agency of mourners is one of the most unhelpful cross-cultural generalizations implicit within contemporary archaeological theory.

THE DEAD AS AGENTS

How might we consider the dead as having agency when, by definition, they cannot seemingly act or think on their own behalf? The key lies in the frequently observed evidence that, for many cultures, the social, symbolic and mnemonic significance of the dead body does not end with the extinguishing of vital signs. While we might claim from a scientific standpoint that 'objectively' the living person is 'no more' upon death, few societies regard death in such a clinical way. As Hertz (1960) argued long ago, death is not an event but a transition during which the physical body and the changing identity of the deceased can continue to be closely connected, both throughout the funeral and during any subsequent ancestral rites. Regardless of whether a particular culture envisions and articulates a defined eschatology or practises secondary rites (see Metcalf and Huntington, 1991), the dead (individually or collectively) are often perceived to influence and even control the manner of their treatment, their identities and remembrance through a dialogue with the living. Taking this argument further, it might therefore be suggested that the corporeal presence of the dead provides an agency to affect the experience and actions of mourners and evoke memories of the past, rather than serving as a static and passive set of substances manipulated and disposed of by the mourners to serve their socio-political ends (see also Tarlow, 2002: 92–3).

Depending on the social and cultural context, the agency of the dead might manifest itself in numerous different ways. During their lifetime the deceased may have issued direct instructions to mourners concerning how they were to be remembered and this can be seen as a form of agency that can be either respected or denied subsequently by mourners. The dead person may have equally made financial provision for the

celebration of their death and the building of their tomb. Mourners may be bound to the instructions of the deceased because of vassalage, kinship ties, reciprocal obligations or (for societies that have developed writing) because of the legally binding instructions of wills concerning the disposal of the deceased and their property.

Yet the agency of the dead can take more direct and powerful forms during mortuary practices. In many societies the deceased is believed to continue to interact with the living via dreams, ghostly apparitions and shamanic séances (e.g. Battaglia, 1990: 165; Vitebsky, 1993). In a further sense, mourners during funerals and ancestral rites can be believed to take on the role of the deceased through spirit possession or by simply acting on their behalf. The legitimacy of their acts often derives from the fact that they are not agents in their own right, but agents for the dead (e.g. Parry, 1995: 156–7). So while these individuals *seem* to be acting independently and with their own agency, rarely is the agency of the dead irrelevant in directing the form and character of the mortuary practices via mourners.

In all of these ways, the deceased has the potential for social action after their biological death. Of most significance for our discussion here, the physicality and materiality of the dead body and its associated arte-facts, structures and places can be seen as extensions of the deceased's personhood, actively affecting the remembrance of the deceased by the living and structuring future social action. Therefore the bodies of the dead in past societies may not have had a continued consciousness from a western medical perspective, but they may have had the 'agency' to affect the actions of mourners and their *social memory* through their corporeality. Therefore, while archaeologists have discussed permanent monuments in many past societies as foci for the influence of 'the ancestors' and 'the past' in a general sense (e.g. Barrett, 1994), the bodies of the dead during the funeral itself need to be considered as a further influence upon social choices and social remembrance.

With these themes in mind, how might we construct an approach to past mortuary practices and remembrance that incorporates the agency of both the living *and* the dead? The agency of the dead body has recently been discussed by the sociologists Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Hockey who highlight the role of the corpse as a vehicle for remembrance (2001). They recognize that anthropological and sociological studies of mortuary practices and bereavement have failed to adequately theorize the nature of the dead body as both person and object. They suggest a new approach to the metaphorical and mnemonic significance of the corpse by drawing upon Alfred Gell's approach to the agency in art and artefacts (Gell, 1998). While debates remain concerning whether it is appropriate to regard artefacts as having personalities and agency, this theory is valuable in understanding the corpse as holding a special significance by

being both person and object. When applied to the mortuary context, Gell's theory allows both bodies and bones to be regarded as having social agency through their continuing relationship with artefacts, monuments, places and the bodies of the living. This is because the body in death is often linked biographically and retrospectively to the person as they were in life, as well as prospectively to an aspired ancestral or after-life existence for the deceased (Hallam and Hockey, 2001: 133–41). In this way, the dead body can be conceptualized as a node in a nexus of social relationships, objects and exchanges through which personhood and remembrance are distributed and constituted.

Inevitably there are no universal laws in this regard. The agency of the corpse might take different forms at each stage of a particular funeral and may be perceived in contrasting ways in different socio-political contexts. For instance, in some communities, the 'agency' of the dead may lead to numerous attempts to manage and control the sensory experience of the body in death. The body undergoing decomposition and transformation affects memory through a response of fear, revulsion and avoidance (Hertz, 1960). In other cases, the experience of the cadaver creates such a unique and powerful impact on the senses that it can form the very basis of the way the dead person is remembered. In either case, the corpse has agency in an opposite way to that described by Gell as a 'technology of enchantment' (Gell, 1988). The experience of the dead body and the disgust that it often promotes may work in tandem to render the deceased memorable (Connor, 1995; Kus, 1992; Tarlow, 2002: 91). In such circumstances, the disposal of the dead can be seen as a 'technology of remembrance' (Jones, 2003) in which the dead have agency in affecting the constitution of their new identities and the manner of their remembrance. For instance, a corpse may be displayed to the living for a short time, impacting on their memory in a direct and powerful way. Soon after, the corpse may be hidden from view within a coffin and then buried beneath a tombstone. Yet the body's presence (or presumed presence) continues to assert a mnemonic agency on the interaction of the living via the objects and places that it is associated with, even though, or perhaps because, it is absent from the senses of mourners. In this way, through either the experience of the corpse or its avoidance, the materiality and transformation of the dead body can provide a focus around which memories and identities are constituted.

CREMATION PRACTICES IN EARLY ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND

Archaeological research offers many opportunities for developing an approach to death, burial and remembrance that recognizes the

centrality of the social and mnemonic agency of human remains. Evidence for the fragmentation, circulation, preservation and representation of human remains in different funerary, religious and domestic contexts may indicate contrasting engagements between the living and the dead in which bodies, bones and material culture may have held an agency influencing remembrance (e.g. Fowler, 2001, 2002; Meskell, 2003: 40–6). For example, the widespread and varied practices employed in cremating the dead found in many prehistoric and early historic cultures provide a rich set of data to investigate the mnemonic agency of bodies and bones. By focusing on cremation, this study builds upon recent attempts to theorize the social and cosmological significance of burning the dead in past societies (Downes, 1999; Fitzpatrick, 2000; Oestigaard, 1999; Pearce, 1998). In British archaeology, the richest data for cremation rites derives from the early Anglo-Saxon period (c. AD 450–600). This was the last period in which cremation was widely practised in Britain before its re-emergence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Jupp and Walter, 1999: 264–6). In the 5th and 6th centuries AD, both cremation and inhumation graves have been uncovered across England, but in eastern 'Anglian' England, a distinctive group of extremely large cemeteries have been revealed containing many hundreds, sometimes thousands, of graves in which cremation is the predominant means of disposing of the dead (Williams, 2002). Traditionally these burials have been regarded as material evidence of Germanic invaders and settlers from across the North Sea who orchestrated a political take-over following the collapse of the Roman state and laid the foundations for the subsequent emergence of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (see Hills, 1993, 2003). Yet for our purposes the detailed archaeological and osteological evidence from these cemeteries provides a case study for how we might wish to address the social and mnemonic significance of cremation in promoting the agency of the dead.

Early Anglo-Saxon cremation graves usually consist of the burnt remains of one or more individuals buried within (often richly decorated) ceramic urns with the ashes of sacrificed animals and fragments of burnt artefacts. Prior to the burial, the detail of the rituals and practices surrounding the cremation and post-cremation treatment of the dead in early Anglo-Saxon England are now lost to us. This is because archaeologists usually only find the burials and rarely uncover pyre-sites and pyre debris. Moreover, the evidence from the graves suggests that there were complex regional and chronological variations (see Richards, 1987, 1995). Equally, there are no surviving contemporary texts or images portraying mortuary practices in Britain during these centuries. However, archaeological excavations in cemeteries such as Newark in Nottinghamshire (Kinsley, 1989), Sancton in East Yorkshire (Myres and Southern, 1973; Timby, 1993) and Spong Hill in Norfolk (Hills, 1993)

provide enough evidence for us to appreciate early Anglo-Saxon crema-
tion rites as complex sequences of performances concerned with trans-
forming and then reconstituting the dead into a new material form.
Previous studies have already set the scene for this study by identifying
the social and mnemonic roles of artefacts employed in the cremation
rite (Ravn, 1999; Richards, 1987, 1995; Williams, 2002, 2003) but the rich
osteological evidence, particularly that compiled by Jackie McKinley and
Julie Bond for the cemeteries of Spong Hill and Sancton, has yet to be
theorized in a similar way (Bond, 1996; McKinley, 1994a; Williams,
2001b). In the absence of detailed experimental and ethno-archaeological
research concerning the technology and spectacle of cremation rites (but
see Downes, 1999; McKinley, 1994a, 1997; Sigvallius, 1994), this article
draws upon anthropological, ethnographic and forensic accounts of the
transformation of the body during cremation so far largely untapped by
British archaeologists. These sources may not provide direct analogies
for the situation in early Anglo-Saxon England, but they do provide a
range of possibilities for how corpses may have been experienced and
perceived during the cremation process and subsequently ascribed a
mnemonic agency of their own.

CREMATING THE CORPSE

Evidence from cremation burials at Spong Hill and Sancton (McKinley,
1994a) and a possible pyre site at Snape (Filmer-Sankey and Pestell, 2001)
combine to suggest that the early Anglo-Saxon funeral could have
involved the construction of a rectangular pyre of oak covered with hazel
brushwood (McKinley, 1994a: 82). The body was probably placed in an
extended supine position given the variations in the effects of heat on
the cremated bone recovered from cremation burials (Figure 1. See also
McKinley, 1994a: 82). It is also clear that corpses were clothed and
artefacts were placed with the dead on the pyre. This is supported by
the range of artefacts recovered from cinerary urns, many of which are
paralleled in contemporary inhumation graves where the bodies tended
to be clothed and accompanied by grave-goods when buried. Moreover,
copper-alloy brooches and other dress accessories are sometimes found
fused to fragments of cremated bone, giving us evidence of their position
on the pyre. The evidence supports the view that (for some adult females
at least) the dead were clothed in a comparable way to inhumation
burials (McKinley, 1994a: 83–4).

   The body would have been placed on top of the main structure of
the pyre, perhaps only enclosed in a coffin, textiles and/or by brushwood.
This reconstruction is supported by ethnographic records of open-air
cremations (e.g. Jochelson, 1908) and the differential extent of burning
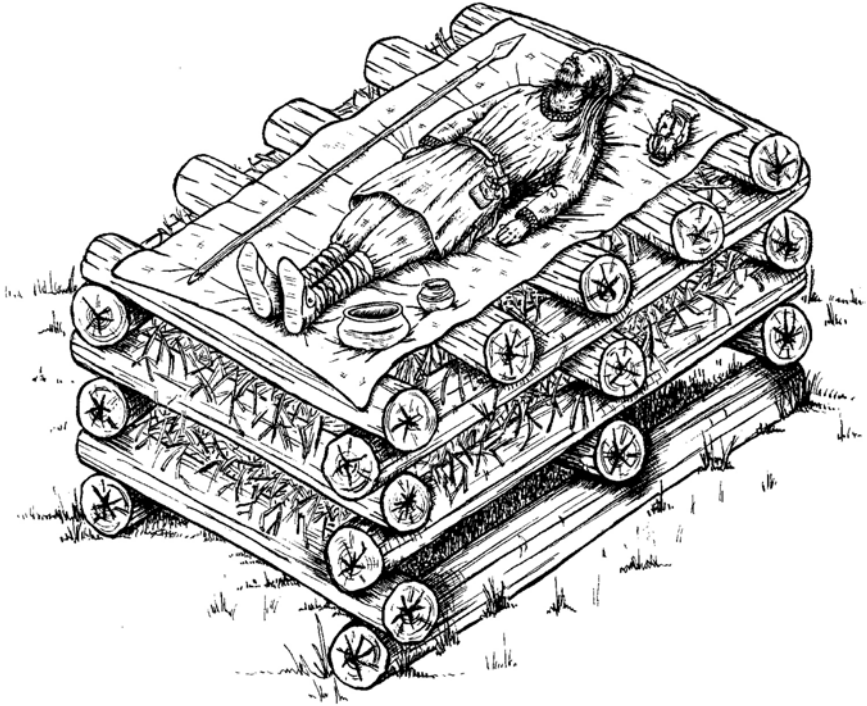found on different parts of the cremated skeletons from Spong Hill

FIGURE 1 Artist's impression of an early Anglo-Saxon period cremation pyre. The dead were probably dressed for death and accompanied by a range of artefacts and the remains of sacrificed animals. In addition, the body may have been covered by further pyre material, coffin, textiles and a canopy only to be revealed once again during the cremation.

Drawn by S. Mallard, reproduced with the kind permission of the artist and Tempus Publishing from Glasswell (2002: 49)

(McKinley, 1994a: 83; see also Sigvallius, 1994; contra Wells, 1960; Welch, 1992). In some funerals more than one individual may have been cremated upon the same pyre. Also, sacrificed animals including horses, sheep/goat, cattle, pig, dog and a range of other species were placed on the pyre either as whole animals or as joints of meat (Bond in Timby, 1993; Bond in McKinley, 1994a: 121–35; Bond, 1996). This evidence suggests that cremation pyres could have been sizeable structures built for the conflagration of people but also artefacts and animals.

In combination, this evidence allows us to consider how the pyre, body and associated animals and artefacts were employed to construct a temporary and idealized 'image of the dead' equivalent to that composed by mourners before the back-filling of inhumation graves (Barrett, 1994; Carver, 2000; Halsall, 1998). This portrayal or

'scene-making' focusing on the corpse (Halsall, 1998: 334) was clearly intended to be remembered by mourners, not through its endurance and permanence, but through its brief visibility and subsequent destruction. Indeed, the remembrance of the dead may have been only possible by witnessing the temporary display of the body on the 'ephemeral monument' created by the pyre and artefacts, followed by its rapid and public transformation by fire (see Küchler, 1999, 2002; Williams, 2001a, 2004).

Once the pyre had been lit, the fire rapidly broke down the composed image of the deceased. The cremation would have lasted around ten hours and at its height may have reached temperatures of up to 1200°C (Figure 2. See McKinley, 1994a: 84). Unlike cremation in our society, this was a visual spectacle of transformation that would be remembered by the mourners. The forensic and ethnographic literature provides us with an expectation of what might have occurred as the body was transformed during cremation into a series of physical and sensory components including heat, smoke, steam, bone and charred flesh. The inside of the body became visible as its many layers and surfaces were breached and fragmented. Firstly, the coverings of wood, bark, hides, leather or textile (if pyre material, canopies and coffins covered the body) were burnt off to reveal the body. Next, the clothing, hair, skin and fat were sequentially destroyed revealing the muscles, organs and bone. As the body was heated, the evaporation of the bodily liquids may have occurred so speedily that jets of steam sprayed from the body. Once heated, the body fat upon the clothed cadaver would perpetuate the cremation process, the corpse itself seemingly accentuating the transformation initiated by the fire. The muscles can tighten under the effects of heat followed by the charring of the muscles and organs before they were consumed by the flames. As the cremation continued, the bony frame of the body including the rib-cage and the skull was revealed, penetrated and fragmented by the fire (see Bohnert et al., 1997: 58–60; Bohnert et al., 1998: 13–16). For hours until the pyre had cooled, the fragmented bones might have remained visible as indications of the continued presence of the body that had earlier been 'composed' on the pyre.

Therefore, cremation was far from being a quick, clean and clinical 'destruction of the body' as it is often perceived by archaeologists. While cremation certainly speeded up and controlled the decomposition of the dead, cremation equally involved a complex and sequential metamorphosis in the body's physicality involving many stages of dissolution. The participation and observation of open-air cremations can be considered a veritable assault on the senses by these changes. Although composed in a heroic style by a later Christian Anglo-Saxon poet (and therefore not a direct indication of how cremation was perceived in the
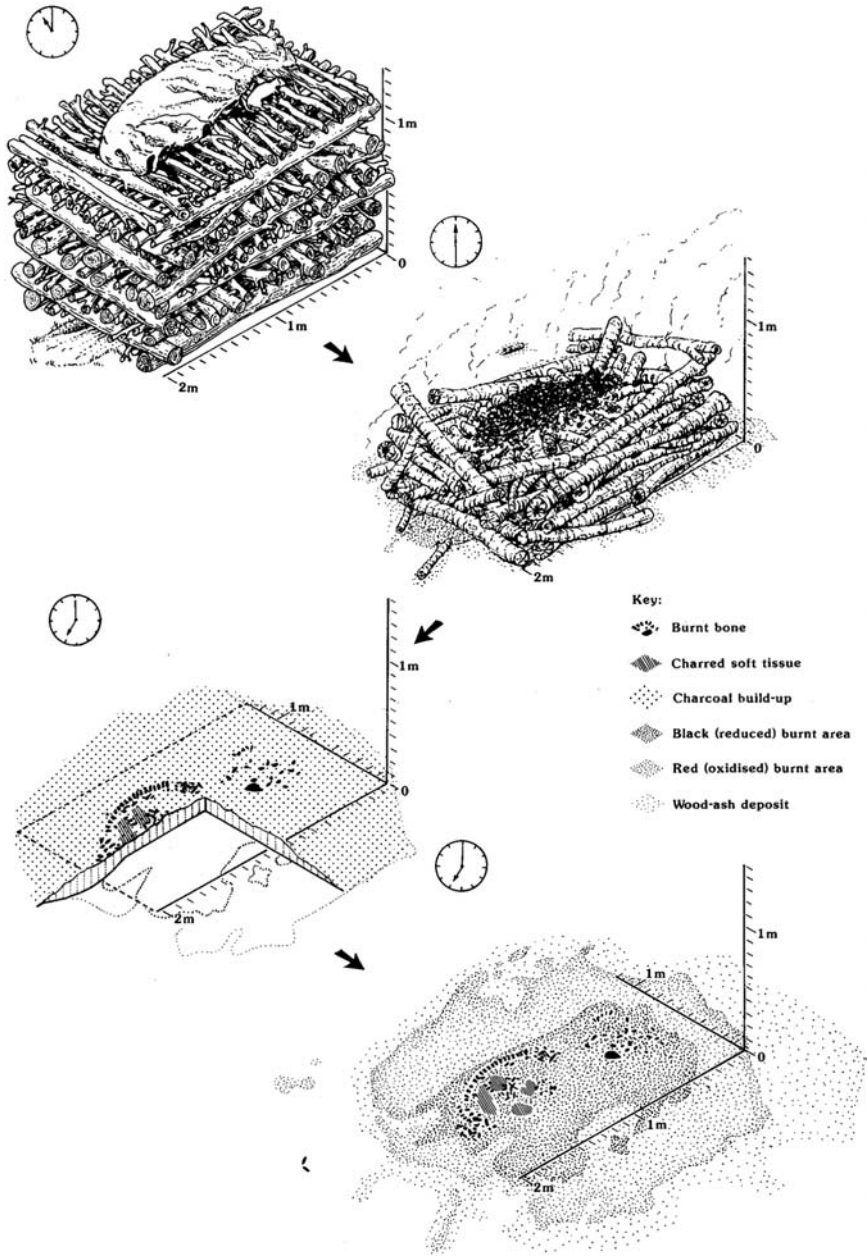
Key:

- **Burnt bone**
- **Charred soft tissue**
- **Charcoal build-up**
- **Black (reduced) burnt area**
- **Red (oxidised) burnt area**
- **Wood-ash deposit**

FIGURE 2 Schematic diagram showing the pyre collapse from the Guiting Power Experimental Pyre conducted by Jackie McKinley.

Reproduced with kind permission of Wessex Archaeology from Fitzpatrick (1997: 67)

5th and 6th centuries AD), this is certainly the impression gained from the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*:

> The finest fighting-man among the warlike Scyldings was ready for cremation. Upon the pyre the mail-coat was plainly to be seen, stained with blood, the swine-likeness gilded all over, the iron-tough likeness of the boar, and many a noble man, mutilated by wounds, notable men had fallen in that carnage . . . Hildeburgh commanded her own sons to be committed to the flames, their bodies to be burnt and consigned to cremation at their uncle's side. The woman grieved and keened her lamentations. The warrior was raised up on to the pyre. That most enormous fire made of human carrion went whirling up to the clouds and roared in front of the burial mound. Heads melted, deep wounds, malignant sword-bits in the corpse, burnt open when the blood spurted out. Fire, greediest of spirits, swallowed up all those of both nations whom the fighting there had carried off; their glory had slipped away. (Bradley, 1982: 440–1)

This spectacular attack on mourners' senses as the dead body is (or bodies are) transformed might be viewed logically as the natural result of the mourners' actions in building the pyre and placing the dead upon it. Yet, once the fire has been initiated, the corpse and the fire interact in the metamorphosis of the dead (both in chemical and experiential terms). In Gell's terms, while the corpse is the 'index' acted upon by the agency of mourners at the beginning of the ritual sequence, as the cremation proceeds, so the mourners become the 'recipients' of sensory information and the fire and the corpse become agents affecting remembrance and personhood (Gell, 1998).

Certainly, early Anglo-Saxon communities living in dispersed rural communities would have frequently experienced the effects of fire on a range of materials and substances in numerous social contexts. These included the cooking of food in and around houses to the numerous pottery kilns and metalworking furnaces situated upon and around settlements (Powlesland, 2000; West, 1985). These experiences may have contributed to any understandings of the technology and meaning of cremation rites, yet cremation of the human body would have differed from these uses of fire in a number of regards. Cremation involved the use of fire on a large scale to not simply alter the state of materials but to transform and fragment the integrity of people, animals, artefacts and the pyre material. It also offered a ritualized performance aimed at altering a personality known to the mourners. Moreover, cremation is inherently unpredictable in its effects given the variability of the human form and the pyre material selected for combustion, making each cremation a distinctive and memorable performance as well as recalling earlier cremation events.

Consequently, the body is transformed into a series of components upon death and it may even appear to be animated. While the fire itself

is often perceived as having an agency of its own due to its unpredictable nature and its metaphorical associations (Bachelard, 1964), cremation might be seen as the fire and the body working in tandem. Also, while certain changes to the body due to the fire would be expected and inevitable, each cremation would be different and each distinctive inter-action between fire and the corpse might encourage the belief that the personality of the deceased still inhabited the bones. Even if this was not the case, the impact on the senses of the corpse undergoing transform-ation provided a memorable spectacle for onlookers. Let us now discuss how the experience of cremation and the variability of the cremation process might have been 'read' in terms of the agency of the dead.

Numerous factors might affect the rapidity and efficiency of the cremation including the weather conditions, the fuel (wood, peat and so on) used for the pyre, the pyre's construction, size and shape, practices of tending the pyre, as well as the size, posture and position of the body on the pyre (e.g. Sigvallius, 1994: 15). In some societies, substances might be added to enhance the rapidity of cremation, including clarified butter, greases and fats (Dubois, 1906; Kan, 1989: 35). If cremation was not effective, a second cremation might take place or the body could be disposed of in a half-cremated condition (Hiatt, 1969: 105; Parry, 1995). Yet, for societies without the scientific understanding of cremation, the dead themselves might be believed to influence the process of crema-tion. For instance, cremation in India is perceived as a voluntary sacrifice (Parry, 1995) and the sanctity of holy men is believed to ensure their spontaneous combustion (Dubois, 1906). At the other extreme, Barber reports that the perceived reluctance of a body to burn in post-medieval Europe was often 'read' as evidence of the corpse's possession by a revenant (Barber, 1988). Therefore, the technological processes of the corpse's transformation in specific cultural terms may often be under-stood as evidence of the corpse's continued volition rather than the efficiency of the techniques employed by the living.

The corpse's visual changes and movements on the pyre might have further encouraged a belief in the participation of the dead in the funeral. As mentioned earlier, forensic accounts refer to the phenomenon of the tightening of muscles and sinews during rapid heating making the limbs appear to twitch and move into a contracted position; the 'pugilistic attitude' (Bohnert et al., 1998; Knüsel et al., 1996). In ethnographic accounts this is sometimes recorded more dramatically (and not always reliably); the arms and legs of the corpse were drawn up towards the torso and the body appeared to writhe as if alive (Davis, 1921: 96; Heye, 1921: 14). The expansion of internal liquids and gases would have made the corpse change colour, become bloated, and blood and other internal liquids might have oozed from the corpse's orifices. In some cases, the body may have exploded if there was no easy outlet for the liquids and

gases heated in the cremation (Barber, 1988: 103–19; Bohnert et al., 1998). For early Anglo-Saxon communities unaware of the physical and bio-chemical changes taking place, these phenomena could have been interpreted as evidence of the corpse's own volition.

Upon heating, any insects and maggots already attacking the corpse or inhabiting the pyre would have reacted and tried to escape. To onlookers this may have appeared as if they were produced by the deceased, as in other times and places where carrion-eaters are often seen as manifestations of the dead (Barber, 1988). Furthermore, there are rare but possible scenarios of the cremation of a person who appears to be dead only to be revived by the heat of the pyre. Among Indians of the American Southwest, these individuals were regarded as socially dead and may even be killed to allow the cremation to proceed (Davis, 1921: 98). Such instances, although rare, could easily promote a folklore in cremating societies of the animated corpse.

During cremation, the body participated in other forms of animacy. Movement upwards and around the pyre took place in the form of heat, light and smoke. These emissions impacted upon the senses of mourners and made approaching the pyre treacherous. Moreover, in some cremating societies the smoke and gases are thought to be potentially 'polluting'; both spiritually and physically harmful (Chagnon, 1982: 50; Heye, 1921). They might equally be regarded as further 'signs' of the deceased communicating with the living or even as components of the deceased's body as it is transformed from physical whole to a dispersed set of substances. Therefore this 'animation' may be interpreted in cosmological terms (as the escaping spirit of the deceased journeying to other worlds: Kan, 1989: 113), or ontologically as an extension of the body in its metamorphosis. In the second account of cremation found in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, the hero's funeral emphasizes this vertical movement and might be read in both these senses:

> Smoke from the wood climbed up, black above the blaze, and roaring flame, mingled with weeping . . . Heaven swallowed up the smoke. (Bradley, 1982: 493–4)

As smoke, heat and light dissipated upwards and outwards, so the body moved downwards. Bodily fluids would have descended through the pyre, reacting with the heat and flames. Experiments and ethnographies illustrate that, as the pyre collapses, the corpse frequently retains its horizontal posture and the components of the body remain in anatomical position (see later). The body sank through the layers of burning wood towards the ground surface and was converted to bone, ash and charcoal. As with the flames and smoke, this downward movement of the body during its transformation could have been interpreted in social, cosmological and ontological terms. For example, the corpse's hands are

expected to stay in position during the tending of pyres among the Nivkh of Siberia in order for the cremation to be properly completed. If they move away from the desired location, it was considered a bad omen and mourners attempt to restore them (Black, 1973). In these ways, the corpse would seem to act of its own volition through the auspices of the conflagration.

As well as visual changes to the body on the pyre, the corpse might also emit a range of sounds that could either have been heard and interpreted by onlookers, or might equally be actively avoided. As well as the cracking and snapping of muscles and bones and the explosion of gases within the body there are even ethnographic reports of unearthly moans uttered by corpses during the cremation because gases expanded in the chest due to rapid heating. The sounds caused by the pyre material such as the snapping and cracking of wood might have equally been 'read' as signs of the changing form of the deceased. For instance, among the Nivkh, Black reported that a child's soul is thought to be afraid of the crackling of the larch wood used for the pyres on which adults are cremated, so children are instead cremated on juniper wood pyres (Black, 1973: 68, 73). These acoustic effects might have encouraged the belief in the 'animation' of the body during the cremation process.

The corpse would have affected mourners through the medium of smell. A range of ethnographies and other sources mention that cremated bodies produced a distinctive and memorable acrid odour comparable to burnt hair. The importance of the appropriate management of aromas during funerals in the social construction of remembrance and identities has been widely discussed (Kus, 1992) and in some societies it can be the most important of the senses in mediating remembrance as, for example, in New Ireland, Melanesia (Küchler, 2002). Woods with distinctive scents such as sandal, mango, wood-apple and juniper to obscure the smell of the burning body are recorded as desirable for aesthetic and religious, as well as purely practical, reasons in Indian and South-East Asian cremation rites (Dubois, 1906; Parry, 1995: 176; Wales, 1931: 159). Certainly in Roman cremation ceremonies, we find the careful management of odour through the use of selected woods, perfumes and incense (Toynbee, 1971). While direct evidence is lacking, there is every reason to suppose that in the early Anglo-Saxon period, the cremation event was as much defined by smell and sound as by visual spectacle.

In some instances known from ethnographic case studies, even closer physical engagements were made with the corpse during cremation. Often, only selected mourners with close relations with the dead were allowed to light the pyre as among the Nivkh and in northern India (e.g. Black, 1973: 68; Parry, 1995). Meanwhile, participation in preparing the pyre and adding wood once it is alight served to physically

connect the living with the dead. There are even ethnographic examples of mourners touching the burning corpses during cremation, acts that would have closely established the dead in the personal memories of those individuals through emotional and physical pain and in turn make the event memorable for the wider community (e.g. MacLeod, 1925).

The corpse therefore influenced remembrance by the mourners through its apparent animation as it was experienced by all the human senses. In addition, metaphors of movement might have encouraged the belief in the continued volition of the dead. Symbols and images of motion and directionality are commonplace in the mortuary practices of many societies (Parkin, 1992). A prominent part of early Anglo-Saxon funerals was the provision of sacrifice animals, most frequently sheep/goat and horses (Bond, 1996). Rather than beasts killed to exist with the deceased in the afterlife, they may be best regarded as sacrifices to nourish or accompany the dead during their transformation. In this sense, sacrificed animals on the pyre might further emphasize the metaphor of journeying and movement between states and between places (see Williams, 2001b).

Without direct evidence for the form and character of the cremation event in early Anglo-Saxon England, we cannot know which of these physical changes involving fire and the body were prioritized and interpreted, which went unnoticed, and which were actively avoided. Indeed, the only recorded first-hand account of an early medieval cremation ritual was by the Arabic traveller Ibn Fadlan who described a Viking funeral on the Volga in the 10th century. However, not only is the value of this account limited by the author's cultural biases and its separation in time and space from early Anglo-Saxon England, the account focuses almost exclusively on the pre-cremation obsequies (Warmind, 1995). Yet it is hoped that this discussion has opened up a range of new insights that allow archaeologists to appreciate and theorize the centrality of the corpse in the cremation and engage with the possibility that the body's physical transformation witnessed by mourners gave it a social and mnemonic agency.

COLLECTING BONES

While the cremation itself was a public spectacle in which the corpse was the focus of attention, the mnemonic agency of the body might have been equally important when considering the post-cremation rituals. The process of collecting, transporting and disposing of ashes varies in character and significance between societies, but the aim in many contexts is the creation of a 'second body' for the deceased in their ancestral state. In this process, the bones and ashes are more than

materials and substances that are manipulated, they tell stories and are forceful exhibitors of memory.

Again, experimental and ethnographic accounts provide us with sets of expectations of what may have occurred in Anglo-Saxon England. Ash, charcoal and bones can be used in the construction of the dead social person and their remembrance. For example, among the Oraons of India, women went to the cremation ground and picked up the remnants of the bones of the neck, arms, legs and chest of the deceased with their left hands. They placed these on a brass plate or on a new earthenware dish. They then washed the bones in a new piece of cloth, anointed them with tumeric paste and placed the cremated remains into a new, painted earthenware jar. Each bone was kissed as it was placed in the cinerary urn, although care was taken that the lips do not touch the bone (Chandra Roy, 1928: 178). Among the Phayeng of Manipur, India, close attention was paid to the burnt bones. They were picked up from the ashes, washed, wrapped in cloth and interred in a ceramic vessel. The vessel was regarded as the new 'body' of the deceased and the decor-ation on the pot was intended to represent key features of the deceased's anatomy (ManiBabu, 1994). The concept of building a second 'body' for the dead is usually discussed in relation to societies practising second-ary rites (Hertz, 1960; see also Serematakis, 1991), but for cremation rites it is an equally important theme (see Parry, 1995).

In early Anglo-Saxon contexts, it appears that care was taken in collecting a representative sample of the cremated remains from the pyre and placing them in an urn for burial at communal burial sites (Figure 3). Rather than an afterthought following the more important cremation, these practices appear to have been important means of finishing the 'memory-work' of the dead (Küchler, 2002). Indeed, it might be possible to argue that the deceased's personhood was constructed and remem-bered through the post-cremation handling, management and treatment of the cremated bone and associated material culture (Williams, 2001b, 2002, 2003).

After the pyre had cooled, vestiges of the corpse were left behind for the mourners to examine. The burnt bone would have been mixed together with burnt and distorted artefacts, charred soft tissue, charcoal, wood-ash and burnt soil and stones (fuel-ash slag). The collection of bone may have taken many forms. The bone would probably have been easily visible and therefore picked out by hands or tongs. Alternatively, the ashes might have been dowsed in water, wine or another liquid before being winnowed or raked to extract the bone. In any case, there is no reason to regard this as a mundane and practical activity; instead it would have been an emotional and mnemonic process in which the mourners came into direct contact with the transformed remains of individuals they had known. A factor that is distinctive about early
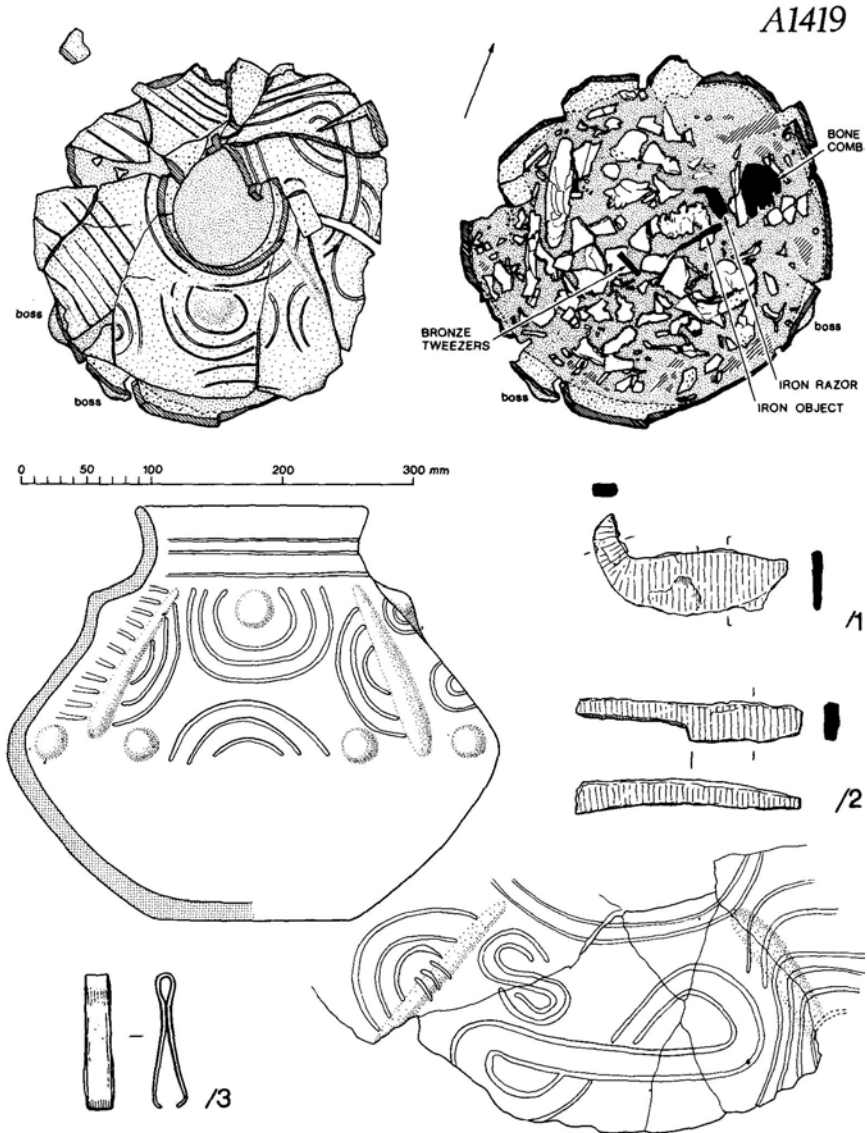
FIGURE 3 Cremation burial A1419 from Sancton, East Yorkshire. A ceramic urn decorated with plastic and incised decoration contained a miniature iron razor, a miniature pair of copper alloy tweezers and fragments of a single-sided composite comb. Osteological analysis indicated that the burial contained the remains of an older subadult (Timby, 1993: 340).

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Anglo-Saxon cremation burials when compared with other periods is the overall absence of pyre material within the urn (McKinley, 1994a: 85). This is difficult to interpret, but it might indicate that there was a degree of care taken to wash the bone or select out some of the bones from other substances in the post-cremation rites. It also may suggest that cremation and the burial of the ashes were not closely associated with the same sites, and that there might have been a distance in time and space between the act of cremation and the act of burial (McKinley, 1994a). This evidence might suggest that cremated remains in early Anglo-Saxon England were given a high degree of attention and manipulation over a lengthy temporal sequence of performances.

Ethnographies show that cremated bone can be deliberately fragmented. For instance, in the American Southwest, ethnographies note that bones might be broken to fit the body into cinerary urns (Davis, 1921: 96; Heye, 1921: 15). Despite breakage and distortion due to the cremation and post-depositional factors, there is no evidence of any deliberate crushing of the bone – it appears that the bone would often remain in large, recognizable pieces (McKinley in Timby, 1993; McKinley, 1994a, 1994b; contra Wilkinson, 1980: 221; McKinley, 1997). Indeed, McKinley notes that much of fragmentation identified in ancient cremations occurs post-deposition (McKinley, 1994b: 342). McKinley states that over 50 per cent of bone fragments from ancient cremations are over 10 mm in size (McKinley, 1994b: 340–1) and therefore likely to be distinctive as human remains to ancient people. For example, at Sancton, skull fragments survived up to 75 mm in length and fragments of long bone up to 100 mm remained despite post-depositional fragmentation. When the pyre-site was examined many more pieces would have been over 5 mm in length and diagnostic (McKinley in Timby, 1993: 297). In other words, despite the effects of the fire, the bone was easily retrievable and identifiable with the deceased and the animals accompanying the dead. The same applies to many of the artefacts: while some would be destroyed completely in the pyre, others would be recognizable. In this way, the remains held memory-force and their materiality connected the living directly with the dead and how their corporeality contrasted both with their appearance in life, and when displayed on the pyre prior to cremation.

The colour of the cremated bone may have also been attributed with significance and served to evoke memories. Unlike the crushed and relatively uniform bone given to mourners by modern crematoria, the products of open-air cremations would not only consist of large, recognizable fragments, but also a range of colours, shapes and textures. Much of the bone from early Anglo-Saxon cremation burials is white or buff coloured, indicative of high temperatures and/or a long duration of exposure to heat and fire (see Shipman et al., 1984). This suggests that

in comparison with other periods, the cremation technology employed in early Anglo-Saxon cremation rites was usually very efficient (McKinley, 1994a: 75, 77). Yet even in the most efficient cremation, some bone was blue or black indicative of exposure to a lower temperature. This could be caused by many factors: position towards the periphery of the pyre, the amount of fat around the bone, the vagaries of pyre construction and the posture of the corpse on the pyre. So for any one individual, the cremated bone consisted of various colours (McKinley, 1994a: 75). Other aspects would leave traces of colour on the bones. Black staining is sometimes noticed, perhaps evidence of charred ligament or muscle tissue. Immediately following cremation, much more of the bone would remain covered by the black remains of charred flesh (McKinley, 1994a: 83). Metal artefacts also may have stained the bone a range of colours as green, pink and yellow stains have been recovered from ancient cremations (McKinley, 1997: 70–1). While often recognized as artefacts, some might be perceived by mourners as parts of the body itself.

Textures, sizes and shapes would also be distinctive. Different parts of the bone would be affected by fire in varied ways, and the natural contours and shapes of the bone would remain visible and open to interpretation. Cremated bones are dehydrated and therefore shrink visibly. They also become distorted through warping and cracking. While these changes are usually interpreted by osteologists as evidence for the technology of cremation, they might have also been interpreted during ancient funerary ceremonies as physical evidence of the transformed identity of the dead (see Shipman et al., 1984; Sigvallius, 1994; McKinley, 1994a).

The relationship between animals and people was also reconfigured during the collection and burial process. Experiments have shown that the bones of people and sacrificed animals would roughly retain their anatomical position in the debris from where they had been lain on the pyre (see earlier in this article). This is certainly applicable to the early Anglo-Saxon context where it appears that there were few attempts to tend the pyre once lit (McKinley, 1994a: 84; McKinley, 1997: 68). If the remains of people and animals could be distinguished from their location and character amongst the pyre debris, then it is interesting that on many occasions, both the remains of animals and people were mixed together and placed within the urns. It is almost as if the new body of the deceased consisted of the personalities of both humans and animals (see Williams, 2001b).

The amount of bone retrieved varies considerably, mainly because of the vagaries of post-depositional disturbance and fragmentation. It is therefore difficult to know how efficient early Anglo-Saxon mourners were in collecting up the ashes from the pyre. It is certainly possible that

early Anglo-Saxon mourners were not concerned with retrieving every piece of bone for burial and allowed some bone to be left on the pyre. They could have even selected some bones for circulation among the mourners as mementoes of the funeral (Toynbee, 1971). In any case, there seems to have been a desire to amass a representative portion of all parts of the body including the limbs, the axial skeleton and the skull in the majority of cremation burials. Therefore, collecting the remains appears to have been aimed at creating a new body from the fragments of the old. The skull seemed to have been particularly important in this regard. Certainly forensic and ethnographic studies show that fragments of the skull are the most diagnostic elements to be found in searching pyre debris. However, it may be also worth noting that in many societies the head is regarded as the seat of personhood (e.g. Pardo, 1989). Fragments of skull are ubiquitous in early Anglo-Saxon cremation urns, and sometimes they are lain over the top of the other cremated remains within the urn hinting that they may have been attributed a special significance (McKinley, 1994a; Steele and Mays in Filmer-Sankey and Pestell, 2001: 227). This might be connected to the fact that the most frequently found objects placed in the post-cremation rite are items associated with the management of head and facial hair, namely combs, tweezers, shears and razors (Williams, 2003). Equally, the creation of a unified 'whole' or 'body' for the dead can be seen in the desire to bury all the remains *within* a cinerary urn. In contrast to cremation deposits from other periods, it is extremely rare in early Anglo-Saxon eastern England for artefacts and bone to be placed outside the urn. In a sense, the urn acted as a practical container for transporting cinerary remains to the burial site but could have also served as a metaphorical 'skin' for the deceased's 'second body' following the cremation.

So, as the mourners collected the remains from the pyre, the bone provided a rich 'text' that could be 'read' by them (Figure 4; see Serematakis, 1991). This text was influenced by the memory-force of the deceased's personhood and the changes it had undergone during cremation. The choice to handle and inter them in a ceramic urn, rather than simply leaving them on the pyre or dispose of them in other ways, was influenced by the continued mnemonic agency of the bone. The effects of the fire may have been thought to 'animate' the body, rather than simply destroying it, making the vestiges of the cremation important in the continuing process of reconstituting the dead into a new materiality and identity. Each new cremation rite would recall events at previous funerals and set up expectations concerning how the body and bone should appear. The agency of the dead influenced the chain of operations of the cremation and post-cremation rites and this in turn would influence future funerals and so reproduce the mortuary tradition as a means of commemorating the dead and the past.

FIGURE 4 Artist's impression by Victor Ambrus of the burial of an early Anglo-Saxon cinerary urn.

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CONCLUSION

This article set out to challenge the current orthodoxy in archaeological thinking that the 'dead cannot bury themselves'. Instead of regarding bodies and bones as simply osteological data or as primarily 'symbolic' (e.g. Shanks and Tilley, 1982) it is argued that we should instead regard the dead body as a focus for remembrance and the construction of personhood. Moreover, it is suggested that in different ways, bodies and bones have a social and mnemonic agency. It is argued that during the cremation and post-cremation rites in early Anglo-Saxon England, human remains may have been regarded as agents in their own transformation and reconstitution (Table 1). As the body was physically transformed through the actions of mourners from flesh to heat, light, bone, ash and smoke, so the body acted back on the mourners, influencing their memories and actions. This in turn may have perpetuated

TABLE 1 A possible sequence of acts performed by mourners in the early Anglo-Saxon cremation rite and the sensory engagements experienced through interaction with the corporeal remains of the dead during each stage of the rite

	Actions of Mourners	*Sensory Engagements with the Dead*
Before Cremation	Washing & dressing the corpse	**Composing the Dead** – Creating a memorable 'image' of the dead
	Transporting the corpse to the cremation site	• The composition and display of the corpse, artefacts and sacrificed animals created a complex performance and 'image' to be remembered
	Production, collection & exchange of artefacts and substances	
	Collecting fuel and building the pyre	• The brevity of the display prior to its dissolution enhancing remembrance
	Placing body, animals and objects on the pyre	
Cremation	Lighting the pyre	**Transforming the Dead** – The impact of cremation on the senses of mourners & onlookers
	Tending the pyre?	
		• Movement – body moves and emits sounds; dispersal of smoke, heat & light; pyre collapses enhanced remembrance
		• Fragmentation – flesh, muscles, organs & bone are exposed & rendered in succession emphasising the transformation of the dead
After Cremation	Cooling the pyre?	**Reconstituting the Dead** – creating a new 'body' for the dead
	Examining and collecting ashes	
	Containing the cremated remains – i.e. ceramic container	• Bones & artefacts exhibit range of textures, colours, sizes and shapes encouraging interpretation by mourners
	Adding new artefacts – e.g. toilet implements & combs	• Containers and objects provide new physical and metaphorical corporeal form for the dead
	Burying the dead	

traditions of mortuary behaviour and created a focus for group remembrance of the dead and the past. This discussion helps us to understand the central role of the dead body's transformation in social remembrance in early Anglo-Saxon cremation rites.

It is hoped that this discussion may have relevance to how archaeologists interpret cremation practices and comparable strategies for the transformation of the body in past societies. There are a number of specific implications for our understanding of cremation, memory and identity in early Anglo-Saxon England. Concerning our interpretation of

early medieval mortuary practices, the argument presented questions whether recent research that has emphasized the role of funerals as contexts for social display, materializing ideologies and legitimizing power relations fully address the complex relationships between the living and the dead constructed through the agency of the dead (e.g. Carver, 2000; Halsall, 1998; Lucy, 2002). Instead, while not having an 'intentionality' in the same way as living agents (Hodder, 2000), it is argued that the early Anglo-Saxon cremated dead were important material in constructing structuring principles that generated and perpetuated conceptions of the dead and the past that in turn provided the basis upon which social identities may have developed (see Barrett, 2000). In turn, it is possible to regard the dead as more than resources, but as performers in the reproduction and transformation of early Anglo-Saxon communities.

The argument also has specific repercussions for our understanding of the social and historical context of cremation in eastern England in the 5th and 6th centuries AD. Cremation in late Roman Britain was a minority rite; inhumation was the predominant mode of disposing of the dead (Philpott, 1991). With the collapse of the Roman control of Britain and its replacement by a patchwork of 'barbarian' territories and kingdoms during the 5th and 6th centuries AD, we see a dramatic shift in settlement, burial and artefact types in eastern England reflecting new social, cultural and religious structures (Arnold, 1997: 19–32, 179–230). While debates continue concerning whether Germanic migration was the primary and only mechanism explaining this change, it seems apparent that the cremation rites and artefacts found at Spong Hill, Sancton, Newark and other large cremation cemeteries owe little directly to the mortuary traditions of Roman Britain. Instead, they appear to represent a re-orientation of communities in eastern England and close and long-term contacts with the continental regions of Schleswig-Holstein and lower Saxony (Hills, 1993, 2003). The choice to inter these cremation burials in large communal cemeteries also reflects continental practice. These were sites that may have served as central burial places of numerous communities and consequently as places of social gatherings, rituals and perhaps also the establishment of socio-political cohesion and authority.

In this light, an appreciation of the close relationships between the living and the dead constructed through cremation rites explains the centrality of the rite in the construction of social memories and, in turn, group identities in this period. This helps to explain (a) why cremation was adopted or continued by selected groups in eastern England in the 5th and 6th centuries AD, and (b) why this rite was subsequently retained and repeatedly selected by these communities for such a long time. The cremation rite was simultaneously both an innovation and an

actively conservative statement. It was innovative in the sense that the rite was previously rare in the geographical region and it involved a manner of treatment and engagement with the bodies of the dead that contrasted markedly with the inhumation practices performed by other contemporary communities in the area (Williams, 2002). Meanwhile, the rite was actively conservative in the fact that it may have evoked associations with ritual practices in regions of northern Germany and southern Scandinavia that (in later centuries at least) were perceived as the ancestral homelands of these communities. Consequently, for those employing the rite and experiencing the dead in this distinctive way, cremation may have been a fundamental means of maintaining a form of relationship with the dead that in turn ensured a close connection between death, memory and identity (see Williams, 2003). As the rite was repeated again and again with similar concluding burial deposits that were taken and interred in communal cemeteries, the interaction of the living and the dead formed a basis for an enduring social tradition. As places of memory; cemeteries may have been foci for an 'ancestral presence'. However, it was the agency of the dead focused upon the body's transformation that seems to have been essential to the enduring significance of cremation as a custom of particular social groups who utilized mortuary practices as a way of actively emphasizing their social identities and perceived social pasts. This approach allows us to consider technologies of remembrance centring on the transformation of the human body as powerful means by which early medieval communities defined social memories and simultaneously distinguished themselves from others.

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