Research Article

Piecing together past human encounters with death: a theory and practice of the archaeology of death (The Gordon Childe Lecture for 2025)

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Abstract

How can archaeologists understand the human experience of death in the deep past? More specifically, how can the archaeological record, consisting of fragmented material traces of past people's actions when faced with death, provide real insights into past lives? This article, which is a version of the Gordon Childe Lecture presented at UCL in May 2025, approaches these fundamental and ambitious questions by drawing inspiration from two foundational materialist thinkers – Gordon Childe and Pierre Bourdieu. Through the example of analysis of mortuary ritual practice in the European Mesolithic, it examines the potential for archaeological analysis of materiality and suggests different analytical pathways for analysis, drawing on insights from ritual theory, practice theory, archaeothanatology and cultural anthropology. Ultimately it asks how we can archaeologically approach human experience not only through an engagement with the material, but also if and how we may move beyond it in our enquiry and address aspects of past lived experience that have left no material trace.

Keywords: materiality; practice; death and burial; Mesolithic; body; interpretation

Introduction

In his seminal work *Piecing Together the Past*, published in 1956, Gordon Childe carefully examines the very principles of archaeology, breaking down the disciplinary approaches to some fundamental questions about the mechanics of archaeological knowledge production. Childe (1956, 1) proposes a way for archaeologists to go from 'all the changes in the material world that are due to human action', in order to 'reconstitute that behaviour as far as he [*sic*!] can and so to recapture the thoughts that behaviour expressed'. He gives himself the task of explaining 'how archaeologists order their data to form a record,

and how they may try to interpret them as concrete embodiments of thoughts' (Childe 1956, 1). It is difficult to overestimate the value of Childe's systematic interrogation of principles and possibilities. It pushes us to identify archaeological methods and theories that are articulated with, and inform, one another, and that are adapted to the nature of our sources – the 'fossilized results of human behaviour' that Childe (1956, 1) talks about, with the aim of using them to get inside the prehistoric mind. This leads to the second fundamental point made by Childe. What distinguishes the archaeologist from a regular collector of stuff is that, for the archaeologist, the stuff, when considered in its context, is 'a clue to something else – the activity and the mentality of their makers and users' (Childe 1956, 5). Childe talks of archaeologists 'as historians' – interested in human actions and thoughts. This may come across as exceedingly fundamental in 2025, 69 years after the first publication of this work, but I find that it is at the basis of our often tacit assumptions that we find the most important building blocks for our theory. It is also the foundational level of our knowledge production that we need to examine critically as we formulate our hypotheses and propose our interpretations.

The second inspiration to this work is Pierre Bourdieu who, less than two decades later in his *An Outline of a Theory of Practice*, first published in French as *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique* in 1972, invited us to question the primacy of linguistically articulated thought for the structuring of our cultures, and instead consider how practical engagement with the material world shapes our understanding and experience of it beyond what is possible, or even necessary, to express in *thoughts*. In a way this challenges the goal of accessing the *mentality* identified by Childe, but when considered at a deeper level, this focus on practice and experience beyond the discursive does not mean that we fall short of that fundamental goal of getting close to humanity in the past, but rather, that we engage with human experience in a different, equally significant, and perhaps even deeper way, than the 'historian' Childe proposes for us. The legacy of both these intellectual strands provides a foundation for archaeology to realise the potential of the materiality of our sources, and to think systematically about how we can use them to gain access to a human dimension of the deep past.

The archaeology of death: the universal, the specific and the material

To explore the legacy of these theoretical points, this article examines the archaeology of death as a case study for the potential of archaeology broadly as a discipline anchored in the examination of materiality. The archaeology of death is not only one of the most iconic and contested traditions within archaeology (Parker Pearson 1999), it is also a field that lends itself particularly well to access the mentality of the *makers* and *users* of the traces left for us to analyse. In the archaeology of death we expect to find a higher concentration of intentional, culturally meaningful and/or ritualised practice (Berggren and Nilsson Stutz 2010). The gestures and practices that left behind graves, cremation deposits and other archaeologically recognisable mortuary features highlight the ritualised and culturally meaningful. In addition, the archaeology of death allows us to approach dimensions of human experience, life and culture that lie beyond the material; that is the realm of emotion and affect (Tarlow 2000, 2012), of memory (Williams 2006), ritual (Nilsson Stutz 2003;

Brandt et al. 2014), belief (Tarlow 2011) and how they may be entangled with social change (for example, Norstein and Selsvold 2025). These realms are accessible in other archaeological sources as well, but the archaeology of death provides an exceptionally clear case of this. The focus on death also entails a constant and conscious consideration of what can be viewed as universal and what is culturally specific. The universal experience of death forms a stable point of departure for prehistoric archaeological analysis. The culturally specific layers of how this experience was handled and understood provides a frame for how we understand variation in human experience and how people make sense of their world. Through a combination of methods and theories we can move from the materialised traces towards understanding past lived experiences of death within their cultural context.

Death is a universal human experience. We will all die, and before we do, most of us will experience the death of others – some of them close. This results in a loss, often impactful at both the individual and collective level. It tears the social fabric at many levels, and relationships and responsibilities must be renegotiated. On a personal level, death is a meaningful and emotional experience of loss, grief, anger, remorse, relief and sometimes a mix of contradictory responses – many of them deeply felt.

The other universal aspect of death is its materiality. When a human being dies, a social being disappears, affecting individuals and communities, but in addition, a cadaver emerges as a physical reality that did not exist before (Nilsson Stutz 2003, 81f). This is a fundamental dynamic in the materiality of human experience. While material in character, a human cadaver is not a neutral object – it still, for a time, looks like the person it used to embody, but it no longer *is* that person. The resemblance and its coexisting difference are contradictory and destabilising. In this sense, the human cadaver is, as pointed out by Julia Kristeva in her seminal 1982 essay *The Powers of Horror*, the ultimate abject. It is neither object, nor subject – and it is both at the same time. Deeply liminal, it is situated between object and subject, between life and death, perhaps between hot and cold, good and bad, order and disorder, culture and nature – and, depending on the cultural structure in which it is embedded, between other fundamental dichotomies as well. In addition to being liminal and transgressing fundamental categories, the cadaver is also dynamic. With death, the physical body will not only change nature in an abstract sense; it will also be engaged in a complex biological process of transformation, through decomposition and putrefaction, which will dramatically alter its appearance, its smell and consistency. This adds another layer of abjectivity, and the cadaver becomes an agent that embodies disorder. The process is natural, irreversible and perceptible. It can be manipulated and halted to some extent, but never completely avoided.

When I started writing about the human body as part of the archaeology of death in the 1990s and early 2000s, there was a real lack of attention to materiality in archaeological theory. The body, it was repeatedly stated, was a cultural construct, a metaphor and a concept. Talking about its physicality was rejected as crude and unsophisticated. I found this frustrating. The human cadaver is interesting *because* of its position between nature and culture – to ignore this is to miss an opportunity (Nilsson Stutz 2008). One does not exclude the other. The two play off one another in ways that are interesting and informative.

The living body is controlled by culture (Mauss 1936; Shilling 1993; Strathern 1996). Our *techniques du corps sensu* Mauss and our practices, our habits and habitus *sensu* Bourdieu are embodied and allow us to perform our cultural identities according to norms,

ideals and standards. However, when we die, that mindful-body/embodied-mind nexus dissolves; the control can no longer be exerted from within but now must be imposed on the body from the outside – in the case of death, from the community, the mourners or the ritual specialists (for example, Nilsson Stutz 2003, 98). It is up to them to handle the body in such a way that death becomes culturally acceptable for the living.

Humans tend to respond to death with ritualised practices. And while the experience of death can be viewed as universal, the ways in which we respond are the complete opposite. Human ritualised responses to death are exceptionally variable – over time, across and sometimes also within cultures. There are very few Archimedean points to rely on when approaching this archaeologically. But one point of departure is the treatment by the living of the human cadaver – for all the reasons outlined above, the emergence of the cadaver constitutes a challenge to the cultural order, which the ritualised handling addresses in a culturally embedded and accepted way. Significantly for archaeology, the cadaver is material in character, and the handling of it involves actions that will leave material traces for us to interpret.

Ritual practice in archaeology

Before discussing mortuary rituals and how we can interpret the traces they have left archaeologically, we must first critically analyse the category 'ritual'. How do rituals work? Can we discuss them in archaeology, especially in prehistoric archaeology where we have no informants, no written sources and no reliable transferred memory allowing us access to myths, cosmologies and central cultural concerns, and nobody to ask: 'What did this mean?' 'Why did you do this?' As an archaeological challenge, it is a familiar one.

If you have studied or worked as an archaeologist for some length of time, you will have heard the joke: if you don't know what it is, call it ritual. Christopher Hawkes (1954) might have agreed – at least with the principle. Ritual would be positioned so high up on his *Ladder of Inference* that it most likely would be out of reach for archaeological analysis and conclusions. I agree that it is probably more difficult to address ritual than diet, but I do not think it is impossible, and I definitely do not think this means that we should not try.

In my work (Nilsson Stutz 2003, 2021; Nilsson Stutz and Stutz 2022), I have built on approaches developed in the 1990s by thinkers like Catherine Bell (1992) who drew on a century of intellectual exploration of the category ritual, bringing her focus to practice theory. She proposed a framework to understand ritual in terms of how people engage practically with it, and how this engagement affects them. Cultural anthropological contributions to this approach, considered broadly, were offered by Philip de Boeck (1995), David Parkin (1999), Sherry Ortner (1989) and Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw (1994). My research came to centre on the liminality of the dead body and the mortuary transition – that is, the transition from living to dead. Here, ethnography-based work by Arnold van Gennep (2011), Mary Douglas (2000), Victor Turner (1995) and Maurice Bloch (1986) were also fundamental for me, as they proposed ways to think about ritual structure, the role of liminality and anti-structure as a phase that almost perfectly frames the abject cadaver and its transformation through ritualised practice.

Coming from religious studies, what Bell (1992) does in her work is to interrogate the category 'ritual'. She realised that definitively delimiting what is and is not ritual is fruitless. More importantly, such categorisation does not really help us in our analysis. Instead of asking what ritual is, she asks what it does and how. Her approach is heavily influenced by Bourdieu's practice theory. She argues that the meaning ascribed to ritual can be elusive and changing – and for that reason, often secondary. What appears to be primary, she argues, is the embodied practice. But instead of viewing meaning as *derivative*, like some early ritual theorists, she reasons that meaning and practice are engaged in a close and dynamic relationship generating each other, but it is the embodied practice that remains unavoidably central (although not necessarily stable – practices also change).

To speak plainly, when you ask someone to explain the meaning of a ritual that they perform, they might give you very general or formulaic answers: it's tradition; it's what we have always done; it's to show respect. People give multiple or even contradictory answers. For example, there is no consensus about the meaning of placing a stone on top of a Jewish gravestone. But there is consensus in the participation and repetition of the act, in the embodied practice. The engagement of performing the act immediately connects people through sensory experiences and memories, to a set of values and concerns – a cosmology, a tradition, an identity. Below the surface of the assigned meaning lies something deeper that connects. This layer of significance is activated through the practical embodied engagement.

When the connection happens, the ritual quality of the gesture is activated – this is what Bell (1992) calls *ritualisation*, and it happens when specific components come together. Not every gesture is ritualised but every gesture does have the potential to become ritualised. Putting stones on a windowsill or on the mantle is different from placing them on the gravestone. In this way ritual practices are connected to cosmology – a concept of an ordered universe, often organised along fundamental pairs of opposing categories: life and death, good and bad, order and disorder.

If we accept Bell's practice-theory-informed model, and if we also accept that human cadavers are not neutral objects but entities that require a response to restore them to order, with that response constituted by ritualised practices, then we can argue that the practical handling of the body, as it is treated between death and final deposition – whatever that might be – is part of a complex weave of ritualised gestures that all, in their way, tap into and reinforce that underlying layer of cosmological meaning.

Mortuary practices, then, are concrete actions by which the disordered cadaver is transformed into an acceptable corpse, taking a shape that signals an image of death that fits into the general cosmology. When embodied, these practices would generate associations that tap into a web of associated meanings and cultural concerns. An acceptable, maybe even a good death is performed and placed within a broader cosmological web of meaning. The ordering of the cadaver indicates to the community that uncontrollable death, in the end, can be controlled by culture. That this death, for all the emotions surrounding the loss, is now acceptable – or that it makes cultural sense.

The handling of the dead body provides a concrete material task that we can study archaeologically. While we do not have access to discourse and words, we have access to fragmented traces of practices. Cultural order is imposed on the dead body through the mortuary practices that we, archaeologists, can recover the traces of, in the archaeological record. This is what we need to piece together.

But how can we approach this archaeologically? To do this, we must focus on the practices, the practical handling of the material and dynamic cadaver. This means that what people did in the past – with their bodies – is our point of departure. To return to our example with the stone placed on the gravestone, other archaeological approaches could be to measure the stones, count them, weigh them, identify them, look at where they were sourced, if they were exchanged over long distances, identify symbolic meanings and so on. This gives us valuable information. But if we want to study *practice* then we must focus first on the embodied practice of placing them there. That is our point of departure from which everything else unfolds.

Archaeothanatology: the archaeology of the handling of the human cadaver

When it comes to studying the practices engaged in handling the human cadaver, one methodology that allows us to do precisely this is archaeothanatology. This field-based approach was developed in France in the 1970s by Claude Masset and, in particular, Henri Duday (2009; Duday et al. 1990; Duday and Masset 1987). It is important to understand that archaeothanatology was never intended to be a checklist or a finished methodology to use for information extraction. It is a three-dimensional way of thinking about spatial and chronological changes over time, within depositional contexts incorporating human remains whose physico-chemical state, physical location and orientation may be affected by multiple potential taphonomic agents. It is characterised by a few unique characteristics:

- The approach puts the human remains at the centre of burial archaeology. At the time of its conception, this was a novelty within a burial archaeology tradition that had focused almost exclusively on artefacts and structures, and where the human remains often were treated as secondary. In this approach the human remains become the focus.
- It is an interdisciplinary approach combining detailed archaeological field observations with knowledge in human biology and physiology to provide a taphonomical and analytical identification of natural and cultural taphonomical processes – that is, archaeological formation processes (Schiffer 1987).
- It captures details in how the body was placed in the grave, and through secondary indicators, it can – even if the primary indicators are long gone – determine if the body was placed in a filled-in pit, a coffin or in a wrapping, if there were objects that since have decomposed which affected the decomposition of the body. It can reconstruct the initial position of the body and determine the state of the corpse during the phases of active engagement with it, including in cases of grave reopenings.
- And while the goal is to reconstruct the handling of the dead body as a *chaîne opératoire*, the approach also has a less explored dimension in that it implicitly centres on the transformation of the corpse, which allows us to think in very concrete terms about the lived experience, including the sensory aspects, of these events in the past and what they may tell us. This is where my theoretical contributions have been focused (Nilsson Stutz 2022).

To illustrate this final and less discussed aspect, I will briefly discuss some cases from my own work on the archaeology of death in Mesolithic Europe, and especially the burial practices at Vedbæk/Bøgebakken (Denmark), Skateholm (Sweden) and Zvejnieki (Latvia). These studies have already been published elsewhere (Nilsson Stutz 2003; 2022) but are used here to illustrate the arguments proposed.

Vedbæk/Bøgebakken consists of 18 burials incorporating a total of 22 human individuals buried in the slope above a Late Mesolithic occupation site in coastal Denmark. The site has been dated to 5500–4700 cal. BC (Brinch Petersen 2015, 110). Skateholm in southern Sweden consists of what was probably at least three settlement/cemetery complexes that were successively established around a prehistoric lagoon, as the sea levels gradually rose thus submerging the sites, causing a sequence of moves from locality to locality.[1] The well-documented cemetery sites of Skateholm I and II contain a total of 87 burials with 86 human individuals. Double and triple graves occur on both sites. The Skateholm complex is known for several dog burials. Finally, Zvejnieki in central northern Latvia is located on a gravel ridge that, during the Stone Age, formed a peninsula in a lake where several areas of occupation sites have been excavated. Along the ridge 330 individuals and counting were buried from the Late Palaeolithic to the Neolithic (which in this case is a term used for ceramic hunters and gatherers). The first burial on the site took place around 7500 cal. BC and the youngest dated burial is from c.2600 cal. BC (Nilsson Stutz et al. 2013).

Both Vedbæk/Bøgebakken and Skateholm are significant from a theoretical point of view because they immediately became emblematic of Late Mesolithic mortuary practices. They elicited archaeologists' imagination about what they might say about Mesolithic life. When they were discovered in the 1970s and 1980s, Mesolithic archaeology was influenced by processual archaeological paradigms. The burials were viewed as sources to discuss questions about social identities, with a focus on gender and social rank. Analytically, the focus was very heavily placed not only on the grave goods that were well preserved, rich and varied, but also on very general observations of the remains of the body, in particular the overall positions in which the body were placed, which varied. My approach to these burials asked completely different questions that focused on what they could tell us about how the people living in these settlements experienced death, how they handled it and what this might tell us about them. I was interested not only in their social roles in terms of age and gender, and whether their political organisation involved inherited ranked statuses, I was more fundamentally interested in what death might have felt like to them, and what this might teach us – about them, and perhaps also about ourselves.

The burials were known for their variation. And indeed, if you focus on grave goods, they vary. But if instead, you focus on the handling of the dead body, the liminal cadaver and its inevitable change, several shared and fundamental traits emerge. The burials are, with a few exceptions, primary burials – meaning that the body was buried intact, shortly after death – and in any case before the processes of decomposition and putrefaction would have radically altered the integrity of the corpse. They were placed in pits that often were immediately filled with sediment, in some cases, in what can be called life-like positions – for example, sitting up or lying on the side. When there is more than one body in the same grave, they are often placed in a way that indicates an ability to relate to one another through sight or touch. In some cases, there is also evidence of the body being wrapped or placed on a sort of bed that could indicate 'comfort' – most notably grave 8

in Vedbæk/Bøgebakken, the famous burial with a young woman buried with a newborn child placed on a swan's wing. The archaeothanatological analysis would show, moreover, that the woman had been placed on top of something – probably supported by a beam-like structure that impacted on the body as soft parts of this bedding decomposed, creating voids behind the body into which the ribs, in particular, collapsed in an unusual pattern.

The observations indicate that these individuals were buried in a way that resembled life. Death, as performed for the survivors during the mortuary rituals in these hunter-gatherer-fisher communities, looks life-like. The bodies are intact, not just through their physical integrity, but also in their preserved ability to feel and see (Figure 1). The last view of the dead would look like sleep. They were cared for, in graves placed close to the settlements. If this is what a good death was like, this would most likely also reflect ideas about the self and the body and life after death, even death itself – one where the integrity of the body seems central, and where personhood was maintained. The fact that these practices relating to the handling of the body remained mostly unchanged, despite the variation expressed in the composition of grave goods, indicates that they must have been related to the most fundamental and non-negotiable values within the society, and that they would probably also resonate with central concerns within the culture more broadly.

Figure 1   Grave 41 Skateholm 1. A double grave containing a man holding a young child in his arms (Source: Lars Larsson)

There are a few cremations on these sites. Like the immediate inhumations, a cremation also avoids the putrefaction and decomposition phases. This seems central. Moreover, and with the hindsight afforded to archaeologists, we know that this emphasis on avoiding or hiding decomposition was about to change with the Neolithic period and its dolmens and passage graves across southern Scandinavia, where decomposition and dissolution of the individual body appear centrally inscribed in the meaning making around death. But this was another world that had not yet emerged in the Late Mesolithic period.

While decomposition and putrefaction thus appear to be explicitly hidden or denied in the dominating mortuary practices at Skateholm and Vedbæk/Bøgebakken, people were aware of skeletal anatomy, for hunter-gatherer-fishers spent a significant part of their lives engaging with animal corpses. Hiding something does not mean that you are ignorant. It may, indeed, indicate the exact opposite. There are a few burials that break away from the script, and by doing so, highlight a tension within the burial programme, or perhaps more carefully theoretically stated, the culturally centring, structured and structuring practices of handling the dead.

The first example is grave 28 in Skateholm I (Figure 2), where the archaeothanatological analysis has demonstrated that the body was buried in such a way to facilitate post-decomposition intervention, resulting in the extraction of specific bones with minimal disturbance. This would have entailed some form of coverage on top of the body that could be lifted to expose the remains after the skeletonisation process was so advanced that even bones with relatively persistent soft tissue articulations could be removed without causing significant disturbances throughout the body. The bones appear to have been carefully removed, and we can assume that they circled back into the world of the living as meaningful. But were they subjects or objects then? Were they metonyms of this specific individual or for the ancestors? For death? Something else? The premeditation of the intervention prompts us to ask why this individual was targeted.

The second example is grave 13 in Skateholm 1 (Figure 3). The pattern of disarticulation of the bones of this individual is paradoxical. Several long bones are disarticulated, while other, more labile articulations are intact (including one hand and one foot). Other elements are completely missing (also one hand and one foot). This cadaver was not buried in a life-like manner shortly after death and with the integrity of the body intact. It appears that the incomplete and partially disarticulated remains were placed in a container and buried. Was this burial, so anathema to the dominating programme at the site, an explicit act that singled him out in death – perhaps as a marker of an exceptional role in life (good, or bad?) – or was this a strategy to spare onlookers from seeing the state of a corpse that did not conform with the 'good death'.

Another relevant observation is that very few of the graves at both Skateholm and Vedbæk/Bøgebakken are disturbed by later burials, which is especially notable considering that these sites appear to have been used over many generations, and that they were probably just one of many sites in a larger system of significant places. These observations led archaeologists to suggest, early on, that the graves probably were physically marked. That said, it is interesting to note that in the few cases in which they were disturbed within the Late Mesolithic period, it seems to have been relatively undramatic. When existing burials were affected by new burial pits, the new interment was carried out, and the affected skeletons were not reconstituted or reorganised. This

Figure 2   Grave 28 Skateholm I. The archaeothanatological analysis has shown that the body of an adult man was placed while the cadaver was still fresh and allowed to decompose in a filled space. After the process of decomposition was advanced enough to have broken down several persistent joints, the grave was reopened and the left radius, ulna, illium and femur were extracted with minimal disturbance to the other adjacent bones. This would have required planning and knowledge about the decomposition process (Source: Lars Larsson)

seems very contradictory to the burial programme just described. Could it be that the dead underwent a cosmologically meaningful transformation taking place after burial, through which the individual gradually got absorbed into death, their personhood fading? If so, we can imagine that the dead individual was understood to become part of a broader collective identity – the past, death, the ancestors – with the skeletons of long deceased persons in the graveyards coming to represent that collective identity, becoming replaced with identities of a collective of the past, of death, or ancestors? My archaeothanatological focus on reconstructing what people were doing with the bodies and bones of the dead in these cemetery contexts does highlight that, for these Late Mesolithic hunter-gatherer-fisher communities, a meaningful transformation was experienced to have happened to the dead, over time and in the ground.

Figure 3 Grave 13 in Skateholm 1. Grave containing the incomplete and partially disarticulated remains of a man, probably placed in some form of container (Source: Lars Larsson)

For southern Scandinavia the burial programme seems to have prioritised the integrity of the body, but this is not universal. During our recent excavations at Zvejnieki in Latvia, we encountered a different form of hunter-gatherer death (Nilsson Stutz and Larsson 2016). In the later periods of use, in particular, we see how the burial ground was intensely used, with repeated disturbance of older burials making way for new ones (Figure 4). The excellent conditions for preservation allow us to see that it would have been clear what was going on, and instead of viewing these repeated disturbances as mistakes, we have interpreted them as intentional and as a recurring part of the mortuary practice. The repeated use of the site and the systematic destruction of older burials indicate that the concerns may have shifted away from preserving the integrity of the body to becoming absorbed in the place itself – along with the previous dead. We can see that soil from nearby, already abandoned settlement sites was used to fill the graves (Nilsson Stutz and Larsson 2016). This line of evidence adds to the impression that the dead and the living were experienced and actively, materially construed as being part of the place. The living people there appear to have been using the materiality of their own past as part of the mortuary practice of filling the graves.

Figure 4   Graves 314–315 in Zvejnieki. A younger burial (315) cuts across the well-preserved remains of an older burial (314). This pattern was common in the intensely used part of the cemetery (Source: Liv Nilsson Stutz)

However, while the pattern at Zvejnieki indicates an acceptance or even an embrace of fragmentation of the decomposed body – that is, the skeleton – in the ground, there are indications of tension also within this programme. Burial 316–317 is a double grave containing a man and a woman placed side by side (Figure 5). The grave is remarkable in many ways. It is deeper than the other graves in the area, by several decimetres. A large stone – not naturally occurring on the site – was found standing in the fill. We have interpreted it as a grave marker. This burial has cut through earlier ones on the way down, and we found remains of several individuals scattered throughout the grave fill. Sometimes, these were very large bones, so they would definitely have been noticeable. The marker stone and the grave pit's depth are interesting. Were these precautions taken to prevent this burial from meeting the same fate as the others?

The burial is very rich in grave goods, particularly in amber. Beads of amber can be found on both individuals, but the woman stands out, with more than 100 large rectangular pieces probably sewn onto her clothes, and with two large rings placed by the left shoulder. The man, however, is even more interesting for the questions that we seek to address here. The archaeothanatological analysis revealed that his body was tightly wrapped at the time of burial. During excavation, an intensely red clayish substance was noted around his face. We suggest that his whole body was transformed before burial: his body wrapped, his face covered with a mask. His body would no longer have looked the way it did when he was alive, by the time the onlookers saw him for a last time in the ground, before the fill covered him. In contrast to the hunter-gatherer-fishers in Skateholm and Vedbæk/Bøgebakken, here, the transition to the world of the dead may have already been more advanced at the time of deposition, presenting a completely different appearance than in life. Maybe you didn't bury a neighbour, a father or a son – perhaps at this stage you were already burying an ancestor. This mindset might also explain why the subsequent disturbances were easier to fit into the cosmology.

Figure 5 Double grave 317–318 in Zvejnieki. The two individuals were placed simultaneously and side by side in this burial rich in red ochre and amber (A). The male (317, to the right), shows evidence of strong lateral compression along his entire body, including pelvis (B) and feet (C), and was presumably tightly wrapped before burial. Traces of what is interpreted as a mask were found on his face. A large stone, interpreted as a grave marker was found standing in the fill above the level of the burial (D) (Source: Liv Nilsson Stutz)

A final example offers yet another set of questions. In 2022, my colleagues Rita Peyroteo-Stjerna, Hayley Mickleburgh, Luis Cardoso and I published evidence of intentional mummification in the Mesolithic, based on this case from the site Arapoucu in the Sado valley, Portugal (Peyroteo-Stjerna et al. 2022). We also reported a few more ambiguous cases from the same region. The archaeothanatological analysis was greatly helped by human taphonomical experiments conducted by Hayley Mickleburgh that provided comparisons of the taphonomic signatures of a buried mummified body compared to a non-mummified one in a similar position.

Placing this practice in the theoretical perspective outlined above includes taking into account how people in the past maintained an intense and knowledgeable engagement with the corpse over time. This is something that intentional mummification of a body demands, even in naturally dry and warm conditions. Mummification practices may have involved trussing of the body, possibly emptying the intestines, elevating the cadaver from the ground and maintaining a smoky fire to keep away insects. The mummification process both maintains and radically transforms the body – it maintains its integrity by preserving skin and conjoining tissues, but its appearance is changed – its skin darkened, dry and hard, its body size diminished, and the whole body lighter and easier to transport. This last characteristic might have been central for the hunter-gatherer-fishers living along the Portuguese estuaries, where the dead were buried in shell-middens that were most easily accessible by boat. What central concerns can be gleaned from this practice? Perhaps it was important to preserve one form of integrity of the body while at the same time ensuring a safe arrival to the chosen place of burial. It is also likely that the process itself of transforming the body over time would be inscribed in the meaning-making of death. It is difficult to find a more salient metaphor for controlling and taming death than this kind of intense engagement with the unstable cadaver.

Widening the view: what can we learn about prehistoric life?

So far, we have been discussing death and mortuary practices. But like any other practice, ritualised mortuary gestures would have been a part of a larger web of practices and associations, contextualised in the structure of the culture. As we explore seemingly complex concepts, such as ritual practice, it is useful to return to basic questions that relate to the practice itself and how it would have been experienced. What was it like? How did it feel? Feelings are culturally situated and even constructed, but the sensory experiences can be a way for us to write a thicker description of the archaeological past, one that allows us to approach people in the past on grounds that are more solid and perhaps lying at that deeper stratum of human life than do ascribed meanings we can only speculate about. Extending the practice-theory perspective discussed above to a broader consideration of embodiment and practice, I emphasise that feelings and emotions are elicited and experienced in the course of practice, in real time, and they contribute to making cultural concerns and memory meaningful.

In his essay on ritual practices among the Luunda (Central Africa), Philip de Boeck (1995) discusses how the memory of ritual experience, and in this case of rites of passage, tend to return throughout life. A sight, a sound or a taste can act as triggers that recall the experience of participating in ritualised practices and as a structuring reminder. When we approach mortuary practices in prehistory, we must situate them within their cultural context and ask straightforward and practical questions about how the practices potentially would have resonated through the culture. Based on this concept, I suggest a few tentative pathways to 'widening the view', as I hypothesise about how the Stone Age European mortuary practices I have studied may have been connected to a broader hunter-gatherer-fisher cosmology and life.

The mortuary practices above are centred on processing the dead human body in culturally prescribed ways. What would it mean to process cadavers, animal and human, among Mesolithic hunters? Were distinctions made between categories – and, if so, how? Going against the dominant trend of erasing the distinctions between humans and animals in some contemporary post-humanist-inspired work in archaeology, I argue that quite broadly, hunter-gatherers, while making room for non-human animal companions in their cosmology and even their everyday practices, from the seduction of their prey to companionship with dogs and other animals, would still make a fundamental distinction between humans and animals. One place where we see this is in the mortuary practices. In the archaeological record of the southern Scandinavian, eastern Baltic and Iberian Mesolithic mortuary practices, human cadavers are not systematically consumed for functionally nutritional purposes (even though potential traces of cannibalism are documented in some contexts in European prehistory, we still understand it as exceptional and ritualised). Rather, they are transformed through ritualised practices and disposed of in ways that tend to differ from how dead animals are discarded. The mortuary programme established and maintained a fundamental categorisation within a cultural cosmology. It was occasionally transgressed. We see animal parts included in human graves (Macāne 2022), we see some individual animals, notably dogs, buried 'like humans' – and we see these cases of humans perhaps treated 'as animals' in death (as with the partial cadaver bundled and buried in a sack, from the Mesolithic cemetery of Skateholm, described

above). But considering that these are rare exceptions among the burials in the Mesolithic cemeteries studied here, the categories 'human' and 'animal' are fundamental, and I argue that they would have played off one another in ways that made meaning.

Another pathway to explore in this endeavour is that of transformation over time, described above as taking place in the ground or through cremation, though other processes of transformation might have been deployed as well. What would it mean for hunter-gatherers to bury, burn and, for example, submerge cadavers? Where are the parallels in the cultural context? I suggest we look at these practices as curation and transformation that would have similarities with other meaningful cultural practices. We have evidence for fish fermentation (Boethius 2016). It is also likely that woodwork and other craft technologies involved submersion in water or application of heat to make the matter pliable, adhesive and controllable. The transformation of matter through various cultural practices may have had parallels in the world of the living. Caching, not only as a vital practice for mobile groups, with the caching of tools, raw materials and foods as a strategy for survival, but also an act that inscribes the landscape with meaningful places (Bjørnevad-Ahlqvist 2020), can map itself onto a practice of placing the dead underground in places of significance, places where they wait, maybe become refined, or where they simply rest, waiting for you to join them.

Finally, perhaps we might venture out even further in hypothesising how long-term changes or regional variations in practices of treating the dead body might have connected with different ontologies in the past. To do this we can begin by looking to other forms of ritualised or symbolic practices in the hunter-gatherer world. In her book *Rock Art and the Wild Mind: Visual imagery in Mesolithic Northern Europe*, Ingrid Fuglestvedt (2018) analyses the rock art of northern Scandinavia from a structuralist perspective, identifying types of composition of the relationship between humans and big-game animals. One of her original suggestions is about the symbolic interoperability between the panels that depict the contours of the animal, often in larger scale, and the later panels that depict animals, including their inner organs and bones forming patterns. She discusses repetitions, variations and transformations as products of the Mesolithic mind in action, engaging the opposition between humans and big-game animals. She traces a transition from an animistic to a totemic rock art, with a gradual move towards a focus on human society. Inspired by these original ideas I believe we could attempt a similar approach to the variations in Scandinavian and Baltic mortuary practices that we observe in time and space across this hunter-gatherer world.

The model is conceptualised on the definitions of new animism and new totemism, relying on arguments by the social anthropologist Phillipe Descola (2013).[2] New animism focuses on the application of interiority and physicality. Animists attribute to non-humans the same interiority as themselves, while recognising a distinction in the physicality. The animals live full social lives and animists view their own society as one among many. They incorporate the non-human world into their sociality. Animals become friends and relatives sharing the same cosmic system. Hunting is part of this cycle and is compensated with acts of giving back, often involving bones or body parts. The focus of distinction is in the outward physicality. Fuglestvedt (2018) sees this in the focus on the contour of the animals in rock art. In burial practice this mindset could be mirrored in the focus on maintaining the integrity of the body after death, exemplified here by the southern Scandinavian

cemeteries at Skateholm and Vedbæk/Bøgebakken. Within a totemic ontology, animals are no longer inducted into sociality by leading parallel social lives. Instead, different *human* categories become central to the ontology, and they are often marked by association with natural categories – for example, animal species. Distinction from other human groups by way of using natural elements is central. Totemic societies also often regard the landscape itself as a source of life, and it includes living and non-living elements with roots in a mythical time. The old forces are still present and can become activated, for example, through ritualised practices. Maintenance of this relationship is central, but it is no longer perceived as a social relationship with other species. It relates instead to ancestral power, from which the humans share an essence – a common substance. Perhaps this is an ontology that would suit the practices that we find at Zveijneiki with the focus on the place in the landscape, of becoming part of this soil filled with the bones – the essence – of the ancestors. Perhaps this is also a key to the premeditated retrieval of bones from the burial in Skateholm. The entanglement of practices indicates a possible coexistence and overlap in the ontologies at work.

The move from an individual focus to a collective one at the transition to the Neolithic was proposed decades ago – and it still seems relevant, but this is different. What I have highlighted here is a transformation within the hunter-gatherer-fisher worlds from an animist to a totemic – and thus a more anthropocentrically social – world that seems to have been more grounded in its territories, more invested in its settlements, burial grounds, fish traps, neighbours and landscapes. This is speculative, but it is a form of speculation that is grounded in archaeological thinking across the empirical and the theoretical. In this model, all three sites can be explored to discuss the coexistence and entanglement of both ontologies within a hunter-gatherer-fisher world.

Piecing together the past as archaeologists

To conclude, I want to bring us back to where we started. Archaeology is about making the materiality of the deep past reveal its complexity to us and about tacking back and forth between evidence and interpretation, and across different epistemologies, but always grounded in the materiality of human life. In *Piecing Together the Past* Gordon Childe (1956) suggests that we should be historians. Two years after the publication of that book, Gordon Willey and Philip Phillips (1958) suggested that we archaeologists should be anthropologists (or, to paraphrase them, we are nothing). This became a rallying call for processual or new archaeology. An expected, backlash emerged with the next generation of post-processualists in the 1980s and 1990s, yet again emphasising the value of the humanities to understand humanity, but it did so by breaking away from anthropology that had shaped the previous paradigm, and instead returned to history and added philosophy and social theory. Today, surfing the tide of the successes of Big Data and methodological advances in the lab sciences, there seems to be a curious push for us to become biologists. But archaeology demands more. As a truly interdisciplinary field, our craft resides in the combination of radically different epistemologies grounded in the natural sciences, the social sciences and the humanities, which combined allow us to explore the complexity of human life. We must resist simplification and embrace the

complexity of the task ahead. In *Piecing Together the Past* Gordon Childe (1956) presented the fundamental mechanics and principles of the discipline. It is up to us to continue to build on this legacy. I suggest that the time is now ripe for us to own our own disciplinary identity in all its complexity, steeped in curiosity, inspired by theory, armed with new methodological tools and always connected to materiality: let us be archaeologists in the full sense of the term – interdisciplinary, yes – and always critical, creative and confident in what we have to offer.

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Notes

1   For Skateholm II, the oldest of the sites, there are no reliable ^{14}C dates from the human remains, but dates obtained from charcoal in the settlement layers place it at 5700–4700 cal. BC. For the younger site, Skateholm I, bone samples from the burials have been dated to 5300–5000 cal. BC. Additional dates have been obtained from charcoal in the graves dating the fill to 4700 cal. BC, with even younger dates (4300 cal. BC) from the adjacent settlement site. The third burial area is only reported from disturbances related to gravel extraction in the area in the 1930s, and it has never been studied (Eriksson and Lidén, 2002).

2 Similar fundamental contributions to the revision of our understanding of hunter-gatherer cosmologies that are relevant for this contextualised approach have been made by Nurit Bird-David (1999) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998), who both emphasise the relational ontologies at work in these dynamic relationships.

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