Deep in Time: meaning and mnemonic in archaeological and diaspora studies of death

Professor Malcolm Lillie
Dr Yvonne Inall

Research Highlights

- Across time the core function of memorialisation processes highlights a perpetual need to maintain an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead.
- There is considerable evidence, particularly in later periods, that the forms and representations of memorials and memorialisation rituals mirror past practices.
- The dead may be transformed through memorialisation processes to reflect the cosmological beliefs of the society.
- Throughout time significant shifts are evident in the ways that society assisted the deceased on their journeys into the afterlife.
- For those whose deaths may have been problematic, ritual processes, showing similar features over time, were enacted to ameliorate troubled spirits and mitigate perceived supernatural dangers to the living.
- Treatment of the physical body was an important part of the memorialisation process, the deceased being treated with intimate care in every historical period.
- Liminal constructs, the spatial patterning and the meaning of deathscapes varied over time depending on the nature of the relationships between the living and the dead.
- The dead often continue to have active social lives in the community of the living through the creation of memorials and the preservation and curation of remains: although throughout all periods there are modes of disposal that result in an ‘invisible dead’.
- Funerary goods, rites and memorials evidence the movement of peoples in complex processes of adaptation and integration between established and incoming cultures.
- While memorialisation practices may change, the concerns they seek to address reverberate across time.
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Executive Summary

1. Background and Rationale
The Deep Time component of the Remember Me project seeks to identify broad trends and themes in memorialisation processes from the Iron Age (beginning c.800BC) through to AD 1640 as a means of informing understanding of the processes and significance of changing memorial practices in contemporary society. Across this span of time there has been an ongoing need to engage with and memorialise the dead. Recurrent themes emerge, and memorialisation practices of the past continue to resonate in the present.

2. Method
Due to the vast time-scale involved in the Deep in Time study a decision was taken to focus on the major funerary and memorialisation practices in each of the main chronological periods:

- Iron Age
- Romano-British
- Anglo-Saxon
- Medieval
- Reformation and post-Reformation to AD 1640

An expanded literature search was conducted using academic search engines, key reference works and targeted searches of the main archaeological journals for each period for key words related to death, mortuary treatments and memorialisation practices. Analysis included a particular focus on key sites in each period, for which abundant literature was available.

3. Iron Age
A number of burial practices were identified for the Iron Age period in Britain, however, there are significant knowledge gaps for much of Britain and many mortuary practices are largely invisible in the archaeological record. The practices which are observed in the archaeological record have a strong regional focus, including the Arras Culture square-barrow cemeteries of East Yorkshire, the Durotrigian inhumation rite, centred on the Dorset coast, and cremation burials in...
the south east of Britain. The Arras Culture barrow burials and the cremation burials of south east Britain demonstrate connections to Continental Europe. In addition to these practices, the deposition of fragmentary human remains within settlement contexts was a mortuary treatment with a wide geographic distribution that covered much of Britain.

4. Romano-British
The arrival of Roman military and colonists during the first century AD resulted in changes in burial and memorialisation practices. Burials become visible in the archaeological record across a far greater number of sites during the Romano-British Period. Early Romano-British burials were cremations. These rites were largely indistinguishable from Late Iron Age British cremation burials and few such burials have been recorded from sites beyond the south east. By the fourth century AD extended, supine inhumation had replaced cremation as the standard burial practice across the Roman Empire, including Roman Britain, as Christian rituals came to the fore. Burials were extramural, and concentrated on urbanised settlements and sites associated with the Roman military. Gravestones appear in Britain for the first time during the Romano-British period, highlighting family and other social connections, and often offering poignant expressions of grief. However, as an intrusive burial culture, the burial practices which came to the fore during the Roman period did not endure, with the British population reverting to practices which were again largely invisible in the archaeological record after Rome withdraws from the province of Britannia.

5. Anglo-Saxon
From the fifth to the seventh centuries AD Britain experienced an influx of migrants: first Irish raiders from the west and Picts from the north. Later, Angles, Saxons and Jutes arrived from across the North Sea. Although the process whereby they invaded and settled is obscure, by AD500 Germanic speakers seem to have settled deep into Britain. The cultural impact of this movement of people was significant, and this included changes in mortuary and memorialisation practices. Cremation was reintroduced to Britain, often practiced alongside inhumation. Anglo-Saxon burials during this period strongly referenced the past, re-using, incorporating and emulating Bronze Age, Iron Age and Romano-British monuments. The wealth of some of these burials speak to the use of memorialisation strategies to reinforce social roles.

By the ninth century, much of Britain had converted to Christianity, and ancestral monuments took on negative associations with paganism and damnation. These monuments were increasingly used as execution cemeteries, inverting their social ranking from the elite to the outcast.
6. Medieval

By the time of the Norman Conquest in 1066 burial rites and memorialisation practices were broadly similar to those observed on the Continent. Extended, supine burial was common practice throughout the medieval period. However, there were significant changes in memorialisation strategies, particularly for the social elite. With the papal recognition of Purgatory in the thirteenth century there was increasing investment in memorialisation. Chantry monuments and bequests, funerary gifts and liturgical endowments led to a profusion of monuments in diverse forms. The need to be remembered was pervasive and led to a professionalisation of memorialisation.

7. Reformation and post-Reformation to AD 1640

The appetite for costly chantry memorials appears to have been declining by the early sixteenth century. The onset of the English Reformation from 1534 hastened the decline and the Act of 1547 enforced a ban and confiscation of chantries. Emerging theological debates about the relationship between the body and the resurrection fundamentally altered the relationship between the living and the dead. The impact of these changes was most visible among the social elite, with a decline in the number of physical memorials erected, and a change in the language of memorialisation, focussed increasingly on remembering pious lives and avoiding calls for intercession.

8. Recurrent themes across time

Across time memorialisation processes demonstrate a need to maintain an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead. The dead may be transformed through memorialisation processes, and the strategies employed reflect the cosmological beliefs of the memorialising society.

Treatment of the physical body was an important part of the memorialisation process, with the corpse being treated with intimate care in every period. Evidence for careful preparation and dress in the Iron Age, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon periods allow inference that the deceased were the focus of a period of display prior to the performance of funerary rites. Archival records for Medieval and early modern periods demonstrate a continued focus on the physical body. Processions also played a significant role in funerals in all periods, with details of the performative aspects preserved in historical accounts of the Romano-British and medieval periods.

The concept of a journey to an afterlife is evidenced through the provision of grave goods: food and drink in the Iron Age and Romano-British periods. Footwear and coins aided Roman Britons in their journey and Anglo-Saxons were provisioned with grave goods symbolising travel by horse or boat. For the medieval dead the
journey was spiritual rather than physical, and the proliferation of chantry services and monuments aided the souls of the departed on their way.

**The dead continued to have active social lives.** The dead were reincorporated into the community through the deposition of fragmentary remains in the Iron Age, the construction of extramural monuments in the Romano-British period, the curation of cremation urns during the Anglo-Saxon period (an activity which also occurs in modern Britain) and the intrusive displays of chantry monuments of the medieval period. In each period the living and the dead continued to interact on a daily basis, forming strong mnemonic ties, carefully curating and renegotiating the memory of the departed.

For **those whose deaths may have been problematic**, ritual processes were enacted to ameliorate troubled spirits and mitigate perceived supernatural dangers to the living, using strategies with recurrent features. Deviant burials of the Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon period included prone and decapitated burials. Criminals and outcasts of the Late Anglo-Saxon and medieval world were excluded from Christian burials. In the early modern period, murders were eligible for the post-mortem violation of anatomical dissection.

**Cemeteries and deathscapes** were recursive, drawing upon, elaborating and sometimes emulating monuments of the deep past. Iron Age monuments built upon Neolithic and Bronze Age legacies and were, in turn, built upon in turn by Romano-British and, later Anglo-Saxon structures. The rise of the Christian church in the Late Anglo-Saxon period changed the focus of mnemonic power away from the pagan past to the new centres of Christian authority.

**Population movements/migration** influenced funerary rites and memorialisation strategies through time. It is apparent that the relationship between movement of people and practices is reflexive and complex. For instance, Romano-British burials included Britons buried as ‘migrants’ as well as non-locals buried in accordance with local tradition. Anglo-Saxon elites brought their burial rites with them but these were quickly adapted to incorporate existing monuments into new memorialisation strategies. Subsequently, Medieval memorialisation highlights the significance of the deceased both in their immediate context, and in international socio-political networks.

9. **Conclusion**

Our study demonstrates that the concerns of the past reverberate through time and remain constant. The ongoing relationships between the living and the dead, between performance, place and the construction of memory all feature strongly in past and present memorialisation strategies.