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Photo by Colleen Morgan

After digging up a few people, most archaeologists come up with a burial plan. One of my graduate student instructors back at my beloved alma mater, the University of Texas, was able to eventually date unmarked 19th century graves to within a year by the style of safety pin that was used to dress the body. He was an expert on all kinds of grave fittings, and knew how much each piece (coffin handles, hinges, etc) had cost–they were all listed in the Sears catalog and minor changes in design were easy to detect. He was going to pick a year and kit himself out perfectly in 19th century burial clothes, correct down to the safety pins, then clutch a shiny new penny in one of his hands.

I've heard of archaeologists wanting to get excarnated, donate their bones to their department, and of course, the ever-popular viking boat burial. Antiquated Vagaries has a couple of good posts on the graves of archaeologists, which usually allude to the subject that the archaeologist was investigating.

Cornelius Holtorf wrote about this phenomenon in his chapter in *Archaeologies of Remembrance: Death and Memory in Past Societies* wherein he writes about a Neolithic passage tomb in Sweden and the memorial for Wilhelm Ekman a few meters away, who died while excavating the tomb. (While this was in 1915, sadly these things happen even today when proper precautions aren't taken.)

My specific chosen commemoration style has changed from time to time, but my general interest in "green" burials was piqued back in 2005, in the New Yorker article The Shroud of Marin by Tad Friend. In this he details the growing phenomenon of people wanting to be buried without concrete vaults, coffins, embalming, or even a tombstone. If there was a coffin or a tombstone, enterprising DIYers wanted to make it themselves. I was interested in this expression of the environmental movement made material in burials, and it continues to come up from time to time on sites like Boingboing and the Make Magazine Blog.

These updates emphasize the distance that has grown between the (primarily white, Western) bereaved and their dead. Death is now fully legislated, and permits are required for most steps of the burial process, from moving the dead body to digging the hole and placing the body in the ground.

So it was with avid interest that I read the newest archaeology-themed issue of Mortality, an academic journal "promoting the interdisciplinary study of death and dying."

As widely-read as I attempt to be, I hadn't heard of Mortality–I'll have to rummage through their back-issues some point soon. In the introductory article, Howard Williams lays out the engagement that mortuary archaeologists have with contemporary death and what they can contribute to our understanding of modern death and death practices. One of the first points that Williams makes is that "the private, individualized and medicalized nature of death in Western

modernity is extensively used by archaeologists as the antithesis of funerals in past, pre-industrial societies" (92). Beyond using modern practice as analogy, Williams also states that "Archaeologists are key stakeholders in current ethical, political and legal debates concerning death and the dead in contemporary society" (93), linking this status to issues of repatriation and reburial. I wonder if there is more to this linkage, this stakeholder status, than Williams allows.

Archaeologists are fairly unusual in the (white, Western) world in that we have a greater intimacy with death and decay. While we certainly deal in lifeways and birth, they are always seen through the yellowed lens of time. Even our contemporary archaeologies are informed by a disciplinary history of studying remains. We count it a boon in many ways–we've gained an understanding of materiality that is unparalleled in other disciplines. As contemporary as your archaeology may be, there is a good chance that as an archaeologist, you have dealt more fully with death and human remains than most people.

Our role in handling human remains has been greatly vilified, especially in North America where (white, Western) we are most certainly not handling the bones of our ancestors. We have come under such criticism that a lot of my colleagues will not excavate burials, nor handle them in any way. The intimacy is denied–we will sort through their trash but will not shake their hand. Fair enough. You do not have to brush the dirt off of someone's pelvic curve to understand their house or their meals. But do we turn our backs on this knowledge entirely?

I wonder if there is a way to use this unusual relationship to death in order to serve (white? Western?) people. In a very specific example, can we help the people that wish to be buried in an environmentally friendly way while not running afoul of very good local laws that protect water tables and prevent disease? Can we use our knowledge of site depositional processes and decomposition, our understanding of burial practices around the world to help people come to terms with the inevitable? Or do we become just another person standing between the bereaved and their beloved? Is there an activist mortuary archaeology?