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Deconstructing "Deviant"

An Introduction to the History of Atypical Burials and the
Importance of Context in the Bioarchaeological Record

AMY B. SCOTT, TRACY K. BETSINGER,
AND ANASTASIA TSALIKI

The treatment of the dead is one of the few universals of all human societies, past and present. In every culture, people do *something* with the dead. What death represents biologically, socially, and culturally, is very different, as there are a myriad of practices and traditions that facilitate these changes in the physical and spiritual states of being, whether immediately obvious or experienced over the long term (see Lizza 2006; Youngner et al. 1999). The complex nature of death, and more specifically how we treat the dead is significant as the intricacies of this process speak to various elements of the individual and the community. While we recognize that funerary rites and mortuary practices do not always involve burials or may not leave archaeological evidence, this volume focuses predominantly on tangible mortuary practices with the acknowledgement that there is more to death beyond physical evidence.

Mortuary practices, specifically burials, have been the subject of research and discussion in archaeology and bioarchaeology for more than ninety years, including early articles such as Kroeber's 1927 treatise, *Disposal of the Dead*, which explores variation in cremation and inhumation practices among indigenous groups of California as well as cross-cultural examples of mortuary customs. This meaning and understanding of the mortuary process was also examined by Hertz (1960) in *Death and the Right Hand* and the social require-

ments (i.e., mourning) needed when one moves from "the visible society of the living into the invisible society of the dead" (86). Binford (1972) and Saxe (1970) solidified mortuary archaeology as a specialty within anthropology, utilizing a "social systems" approach to burials and mortuary treatments (see also O'Shea 1984; Shay 1985). More recently, there has been a broadening of the field to include mortuary individualism and agency (e.g., Aspöck 2008; Tsaliki 2008a, 2008b). Mortuary practices are a focus of research because these treatments are thought to reflect the role of the deceased and their soul "in the lives of the living" (Rakita and Buikstra 2005b: 93). Burial treatments, however, are not just about the dead, they are also about the living (Parker Pearson 1999) and their thoughts, ideas, interpretations, and practices. As Rakita and Buikstra (2005a) point out, "mortuary rites involve manipulations of material culture, social relations, cultural ideals, and the human body" (1). Mortuary treatments, then, represent a nexus of the individual being buried and their social role in life as well as those doing the burying. Burial is a combination of what the deceased requested be done with their remains after death (if such a request was made), the interpretations and feelings about the deceased by the people doing the burying and their adherence to social norms, and the overarching cultural customs that guide and dictate how and why a certain burial type is employed. Teasing these factors apart can be quite difficult and, in some cases, impossible; however, the importance of assessing mortuary practices in a population cannot be denied. Arguably, we learn a significant amount about a culture when we examine their dead and the physical bodies left behind.

This volume focuses on archaeological mortuary practices, and more specifically, on practices considered atypical or non-normative in the expected mortuary traditions of specific geographic regions and temporal periods. By comparing and contrasting various influencing factors to identify the shifting ideologies that influence these practices, we are able to highlight the commonality of creating unique mortuary treatments for unique individuals. This consideration of identity established by the individual in life and subsequently maintained/reconstructed/abandoned/altered by their community after death, inevitably alters how the dead are not only treated but also remain engaged beyond their physical presence. In considering burial specifically, Chapman (2010) outlines that this is a process by which a fragmentation occurs, as a complete representation of the individual cannot possibly be attained within a mortuary context as carried out by the still living population. However, by recognizing this juxtaposition of information provided by the deceased (e.g., age,

sex, diet, disease) and that provided by the living (e.g., artifact inclusion, body positioning, burial location), it is possible to identify common threads of the mortuary process that can speak to larger notions of life and death. As Aspöck (2015) argues, we must embrace the complexity of mortuary behavior by moving beyond simplistic, typologically driven classifications of burial expectations. Humans are a species of extreme variation in life, so why are there expectations of simplicity after death?

Atypical or non-normative burials are those mortuary treatments that differ from what is considered typical for a population (Aspöck 2009; Tsaliki 2008a, 2008b); however, defining what is unusual within a population's complex, diverse mortuary treatments can be difficult. Chapman (2010) has argued that determining what the minimum difference needs to be to classify something as atypical is also challenging, thus making the basic step of identifying a burial as atypical problematic. Additionally, the use of westernized norms to define what is considered atypical is a typological constraint in which mortuary traditions are simplified into only two possible categories (i.e., typical and atypical). As Aspöck (2015) argues, "in any cultural context there are different 'norms' of funerary practices for different types of dead individuals" (88). Within these practices are subtle shifts or "improv[isations] within the larger traditions of funerary performance" that represent local geographic and temporal contexts that can eventually result in larger mortuary changes (Aspöck 2015; Gordon 2014: 42). It is through this continuous range of variation from "ideal to improper" (Aspöck 2015: 88) we are able to highlight the contextual elements of mortuary analysis beyond typological classifications of positive versus negative burial types. As Parker Pearson (1993) argues, understanding the burial process is dependent on the ability of archaeologists to decipher the ever-changing relationship that the living create with the dead.

Atypical mortuary practices first became a focus of processual archaeological inquiry in the early 1970s, as questions of the intentionality and the meaning behind these burials was at the forefront of mortuary research (Aspöck 2008). More broadly, this processual period focused on how variability in mortuary practices fit within a systems model of society (see Binford 1971). Binford (1972) argued that the social persona of an individual during life influenced the mortuary process, where a community had specific obligations to the deceased that were directly influenced by elements of sex, age, status, or other roles the individual may have played within the community. This "duty relationship" between the living and the deceased was therefore considered

a direct and true reflection of that individual's biological, social, and cultural identity (Binford 1972: 225–226).

Concurrent with Binford, Saxe (1970) explored the notion of "deviant" social persona and how certain circumstances during life may alter the way in which an individual was treated after death. From this perspective, Saxe (1970) argued that a deviant social persona would inevitably cause a change in mortuary rituals as these individuals would not be afforded a normal mortuary treatment, but rather one that reflected their degree of social deviancy. Further to this, Saxe (1970) suggested that a deviant individual would not be buried according to the normal traditions based on age, sex, and status, but would likely display a mortuary treatment showing less appreciation and care for the deceased, a notion also supported and further investigated by Goldstein (1981). Together, this work of Binford and Saxe became known as the Saxe-Binford hypothesis, but it was criticized for its rigidity by supporters of Van Gennep (1960), who saw death and burial as a more fluid rite of passage. The identity ascribed to the dead depended on the successful completion of this process, with Ucko (1969) demonstrating this variability of body treatment across cultures.

Following this initial work by Binford and Saxe, O'Shea (1984) and Shay (1985) examined atypical burials using both archaeological and ethnographic evidence. O'Shea (1984) recognized the difficulties in identifying atypical burials, as evidence found in the archaeological record has no ethnographic model to be compared against, and similarly, some ethnographic examples of mortuary traditions are nearly impossible to locate archaeologically (Aspöck 2008). O'Shea (1984) argued that because of this inevitable gap in the archaeological record, it would be impossible to locate and examine all examples of atypical burials. This difficulty associated with archaeological recovery was further explored by the work of Shay (1985), who examined the changing nature of atypical burials and how this categorization is not a static entity within a mortuary context, but rather has the ability to change over time and in different societies. Shay (1985) argued that this variability among atypical burials is an important tool to better analyze social norms and rules, as "deviance helps to mark the boundaries of society" (222). It was based on these early processual models that atypical burials were regarded as a means by which to conceptualize the boundaries of social acceptability.

Moving beyond these processual notions of atypical burials, current post-processual studies involve an exploration of individualism, agency, and the

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impact of these burials on the surrounding natural landscape (Aspöck 2008). Recent studies have also encouraged the inclusion of multiple lines of evidence when assessing atypical burials, such as biological factors, pathological factors (e.g., stress, disease), and social factors, all of which can contribute to the better understanding of these burials and why they are created. This post-processual framework stresses the need for a multidisciplinary approach in research design, analysis, and interpretation (see Knüsel 2010; McHugh 1999; Tsaliki 2008a, 2008b). Aspöck (2009) argues that atypical burials have undergone a transformation within archaeology, from being a secondary concern of the larger social system, to becoming more focused on the individual and elements of agency and identity (see Chapman 2010; Jonsson 2009; Riisøy 2015). Context, then, is of supreme importance. Without context, researchers may not be gaining a full understanding of the atypical burials themselves or of the larger social group under study.

As the exploration of atypical burials has evolved, so has its definition and the terminology used to explore variation in the mortuary process. Originally, the term "deviant" was introduced through the statistical modeling of processual archaeology to identify those that deviated from the norm; however, over time the term deviant and its use in mortuary archaeology has become stigmatized as these burials have, more often than not, been interpreted as representations of the bizarre (Aspöck 2009). While in some circumstances these burials do embody the negative connotations of social, cultural, or biological deviancy, this is not a universal pattern, and as such, terms like "atypical" better represent the flexibility needed when interpreting variation in mortuary practices. For example, the spatial distribution of graves while at times has been argued to represent those considered socially deviant to be separated from their community (e.g., Donnelly and Murphy 2008), such distribution may also represent examples of elite burial requiring separation based on revered status (e.g., Janowski and Kurasiński 2010). Moreover, these types of burials may have played an important role in strengthening early Christian beliefs (e.g., Riisøy 2015) or in contributing to social order (e.g., Betsinger and Scott 2014). Atypical burials exist beyond the confines of deviant behavior or deviant social persona.

A holistic focus provides a means by which to move beyond these binary categorizations in which skeletal analysis, ethnohistorical records, and archaeological interpretations can be combined in a way that highlights the individuality of these particular burials through an allied context. As Fitz-