Performing Pain, Performing Beauty: Dealing With Difficult Death in the Iron Age

Melanie Giles

Traumatic death rends the fabric of personal and social relations in a manner that is qualitatively different to other kinds of mortality. Mourners must deal with the personal affects, familial consequences and political aftermath of such events. This paper examines the way in which performances around such difficult deaths were used to express and negotiate trauma, through the lens of Iron Age burials in Britain and Ireland. It draws on performance theory developed in relation to contexts of violence to argue that such funerals embodied a necessary tension: articulating pain whilst working towards a re-making of the world. The paper makes an original contribution to the archaeological analysis and interpretation of funerary performance, and moves recent debates on violence in the Iron Age into a new arena of study.

Performing pain, performing beauty

The burial of the young woman in a square barrow at the small Iron Age cemetery of Kirkburn, East Yorkshire (Stead 1991, burial K6) must have signalled the end of a protracted and agonizing death. The full-term infant (9–10 lunar months) was interred with its mother, possibly 'in obstruction' in the pelvis (which Sayer and Dickinson have suggested may have been in full dilation, on the basis of the excavation plan, pers.comm.) or immediately following birth, with the umbilical cord intact (Fig. 1; Stead 1991, 136; Giles 2012, 91). As Sayer and Dickinson note (2013, 293), amongst such small-scale agricultural communities, mortality as a result of pregnancy or childbirth would have been relatively common: everyone would have known someone—relative or neighbour—who had died in such circumstances. Women must have reflected on each growing pregnancy with the fear that this was to be their fate. For those assisting with such births (and ultimately, deaths) this must have been a traumatic and devastating experience, in this case involving the 'double loss' of both a valued woman and her offspring (Giles 2012, 92).

Examples of traumatic death in childbirth, as well as violent or disease-related death, would have torn the fabric of small-scale communities, posing spiritual as well as social problems for families concerned with the afterlife of the deceased. Mortuary ethnography provides many examples of those who die 'badly' and are feared for their potential to become unsettled or malicious revenants (Bloch & Parry 1982, 16). This paper argues that mortuary performances relating to such 'difficult deaths' were powerful and important ways in which such communities dealt with their aftermath. It suggests that performance theory developed in contexts of violence can be usefully employed to help us understand how such funerary rites negotiated grief, horror and pain whilst also working towards the future, following such loss.

The article takes its title from an article by James Thompson (2006) in which he considers the role of performance *In Place of War.* Thompson has drawn on the work of Elaine Scarry, particularly *The Body in Pain* (1985) and *On Beauty and Being Just* (2011), to inform his approach. Together, these monographs present a philosophical understanding of the twin poles of extraordinary suffering and striving to achieve 'beauty' (defined not in a simple aesthetic sense but embodying the concept of what is socially fair, just or fitting). Pain shatters and constricts, Scarry argues: robbing us of speech, rendering our experience unintelligible,

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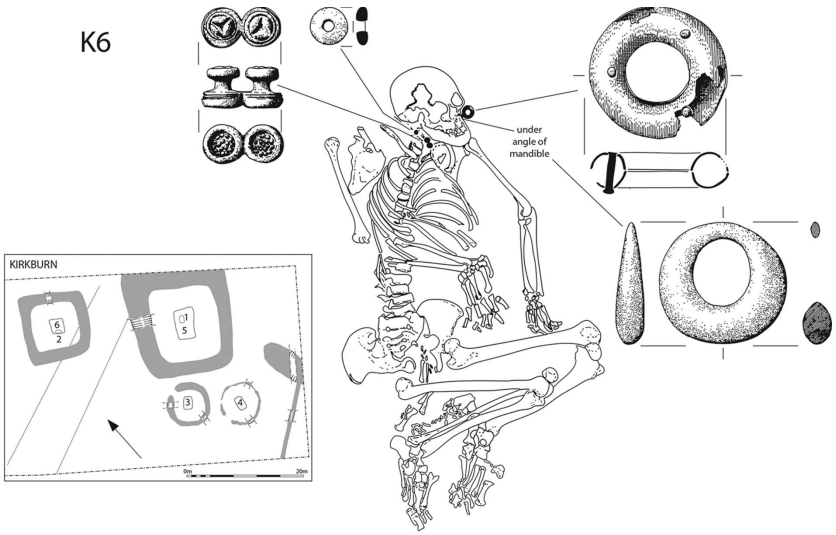


Figure 1. *K6 (Kirkburn, East Yorkshire) mother and infant burial. (Drawing: Joanna Wright, based on Stead 1991, fig. 69.)*

yet in so doing it also provokes us—after the shattering, after the silence—towards acts of 'telling' (Scarry 1985). Thompson (2006, 48) argues that this 'stammering' to articulate horror and grief is important, and he warns us that sometimes such 'tellings' have the capacity not to heal but to re-injure. Some performances may even be designed to keep the wound open so to speak, rather than seek resolution: using the 'shattering affect' (Thompson 2011, 92) of maimed or dead bodies to draw the viewer into a 'performance of remembering' (2011, 97) or reminding wider society of those that have been violently 'disappeared' (see Crossland 2000; Farrell 2001). In contrast, strategies that confront onlookers with the problematic remains of violent events can be powerful ways of continuing to shock or nauseate, long after the original event (Thompson 2011, 93). Performances can even be 'weapons of war' (Hughes 2011, 3), used to terrorize or prompt revenge (sometimes unintentionally so: Thompson 2011, 16).

Yet in his analysis of other projects in conflict-zones, Thompson (2011, 62) notes a strong tendency to focus not only on the revisiting of past violence but on futural, aspirational dimensions of life: performances which suggests the possibility of renewal or the 'remaking' the world, as Scarry puts it (1985). The poetics of beauty, even of playfulness, should not be seen as frivolous, Thompson argues, nor inconsequential. They are the very stuff through which people may re-imagine their lives, nurturing hope: performing tenacity and endurance, in the face of great odds. Thompson draws here upon the work of Jill Dolan, who argues (2005, 6) such performances make 'palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better'. How might this body of work be relevant to mortuary archaeology? In the case studies that follow, I will argue that the intimate and dramatic dimensions of funerary rites that deal with traumatic death can be re-interpreted in light of these ideas: on the one hand, embodying the shattering affect of violence; on the other, creating well-judged moments of 'beauty' towards a new future.

Archaeological approaches to performance: revisiting K6

Earlier work on performance in prehistory (e.g. Thomas 1991, 34; Barrett 1994, 186) and the dramatic qualities of both cremation and inhumation (e.g. Williams 2006) have identified the potential of analysing particular aspects of mortuary rites: their proxemic, kinaesthetic and haptic dimensions, special artefacts included in the grave, the place of burial as well as the form of monument raised over it. Yet (to my knowledge) there has been no general archaeological study of the performative dimensions of burial rituals relating to incidents of *traumatic* death. In the above example of the Kirkburn burial, mother and child were interred in a small cemetery notable for its impressive neighbouring burials: K5 (a chariot burial with chainmail shirt) and K3 (an impressive weapons burial). Both of these graves are exceptional in the character of grave goods interred with the deceased and may indicate similarly problematic deaths or the loss of notable individuals. After an interval, her own grave mound became the site for a second burial of

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a woman who had died during pregnancy, this time with the foetus still *in utero* (Stead 1991, burial K2). This pregnant woman may well have died of a condition such as pre-eclampsia, and was brought to a place of burial already associated with maternal loss. It suggests memory of the first obstetric death had been preserved through oral history, and that this earlier monument was perceived as a suitable final resting place for another mother who died before the birth of her child (Giles 2012, 93).

However, the original burial was distinguished from this second interment by a small suite of objects: a decorated copper-alloy stud; an imported amber bead; a local jet ring; and a copper-alloy tubular ring (Stead 1991, 93). These were found in the head/neck zone, and may have been garment fastenings, earrings, necklace pendants or hair ornaments. All of these objects are notable for their 'special' or symbolic qualities: the warmth, smell and luminous brilliance of jet and amber (often seen as twinned substances, symbolic of life and death) is amplified by their electrostatic power (Woodward 2000). The tubular bronze ring, with organic material noted on the inside/outer surfaces (possibly 'clamping' a piece of fabric) is one of the only true Continental imports into this region (Stead 1991, 94). Usually found in female burials in the pelvic region, they are often regarded as 'magic amulets', suggesting a strong connection with fertility (Raftery 1988). These may have been life-long personal possessions, but given the nature of her death, we might instead propose they were powerful charms supplied for her ordeal, apotropaic or talismanic grave gifts, offered to appease the deceased following her 'bad' death (Giles 2012, 120–21).

This example allows us to unpick contrastive aspects of burial performance: the bearing of a body racked with pain and bloodied with loss to the cemetery; the demarcation of thresholds created through the barrow ditch and grave pit: a small group inside, arranging the body; those outside, watching. Witnessing the careful arrangement of arms and legs to support her swollen corpse, concealing the infant who was still attached to, bound against or placed upon the mother's body: a body dressed and encircled with a set of shining, luminous articles. We can reconstruct the bodily intimacy of these gestures, carried out by close mourners and glimpsed by the wider funeral party. These moments of tender care and adornment were (to borrow Thompson's words) 'no small thing' (2011, 128). They promised the bereaved that this woman and her tiny infant had been appropriately prepared for the afterlife and treated with due respect. As their bodies disappeared from view in the backfilled grave, the drama of the funeral shifted in scale and vigour to the group-work of raising her burial mound, indelibly fixing these events into wider communal memory. This story evidently survived down the generations to help them deal with an analogous death some time later.

Over a decade ago, Pearson and Shanks (2001) analysed the relationship between archaeology and performance through a variety of contrastive case studies, both ancient and modern. From the visual narratives of ancient Greek ceramic friezes to the terror embodied in war helmets, and from excavation as a piece of sensory theatre to contemporary theatrical performances and heritage experiences, they outlined a theatrical poetics and dramaturgy (2001, 125) which anticipate some of the features interpreted from the above burial. At its heart, they argue, performance constructs a ritualized trajectory of events through planned staging and timing, which can be interrupted by sudden gestures or unexpected ruptures to powerful affect. It creates nodes of dense activity: in the above instance, the frame of the grave, the gathering of mourners, the 'props' of grave goods—light, colours and textures which drew the eye. It animates experience through bodily gesture and emotion: in the case of K6, through the work of those dressing and handling the body and grave goods, digging the grave pit and mound—drawing mourners in through sight, sound, smell and bodily exertion. This article argues their work provides a useful model for re-examining the whole cycle of mortuary rites.

Yet, as Howard Williams reminds us (2006), burials are not simply staged tableaux, but live performances that require improvisation. Mourners would have read such unfolding events in terms of their socio-political as well as ritual effectiveness (Schiefflin 1996)—was it going well, was it going to be 'done' right? The ability of those officiating was under scrutiny: death is a key arena in which to establish authority or renown, by ensuring the deceased's appropriate 'send-off' (Giles 2012, 213). For such rituals are risky affairs (Howe 2000), ultimately involving the transformation of the dead into members of the ancestry (Metcalf & Huntingdon 1991, 6) rather than unsettled or malicious revenants (Bloch & Parry 1982, 16). Where that individual had been wrenched from life in a violent manner, this risk was surely amplified.

Violent death and disease

The adult male buried at Acklam Wold (East Yorkshire) died shortly after he had been wounded on the front and back of his head, with severe sharp-force blows from a sword or other fine-bladed weapon

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Figure 2. *(Colour online) The male skull from the Acklam Wold weapons burial, showing evidence of weapons trauma. (Photograph: © and courtesy of Hull and East Riding Museums: Hull Museum.)*

(Dent 1983) (Figs. 2 & 3). Although this was not enough to kill him, recent re-analysis by Sarah King suggests these are peri-mortem wounds which show no signs of healing. The likelihood is that the fatal blow came from a flesh wound that has left no skeletal trace, yet his body has other important tales to tell. Significant evidence for infection (represented by new 'bony' growth on his ribs, scapulae and vertebrae) suggest he was suffering from a chronic pulmonary disease for some time before his death (Giles 2012, 169). Whilst these new observations deserve further analysis, the combination of disease and his eventual violent death suggest he may either have been disadvantaged in combat (such as a raid or inter-personal dual) or else was expelled from his community, becoming the victim of an attack. Whatever the story behind his demise, the performance associated with his burial was a dramatic affair.

He was interred on the heights of Acklam Wold: an impressive location, apparently distant from other burials but in keeping with a number of late Iron Age weapons burials such as North Grimston, Grimthorpe and Bugthorpe. At the time of his burial, an iron sword was dramatically bent at an acute angle of 150° and mineralized impressions of wood on the inside of the blade gave the excavator to believe that this blade had been inside its wooden scabbard at the time of this ritual 'killing' (Dent 1983). Was this the decommissioning of the sword that killed him, or his own sword, which had failed to protect him, ending its life with its master? Whatever the connection between the blade and the body, the scabbard would have 'cracked and splintered under this pressure … an awe-inspiring sight': the skills for which may imply that a smith was responsible, present not just at the making of such a weapon but its unmaking as well (Giles 2012, 170). In this example, the burial ceremony would have been distinguished by a moment of drama: a rupture in the material world that perhaps deliberately evoked and re-lived the rent in the human one. Scarry suggests that the image of weapons (or wounds) is almost essential to the apprehension of another's pain ([1985] 1987, 16). This mortuary rite's creation of a mutually wounded 'armed figure' may have been a painful but fitting performance, designed to negotiate what may have been seen as a needful violent end to his

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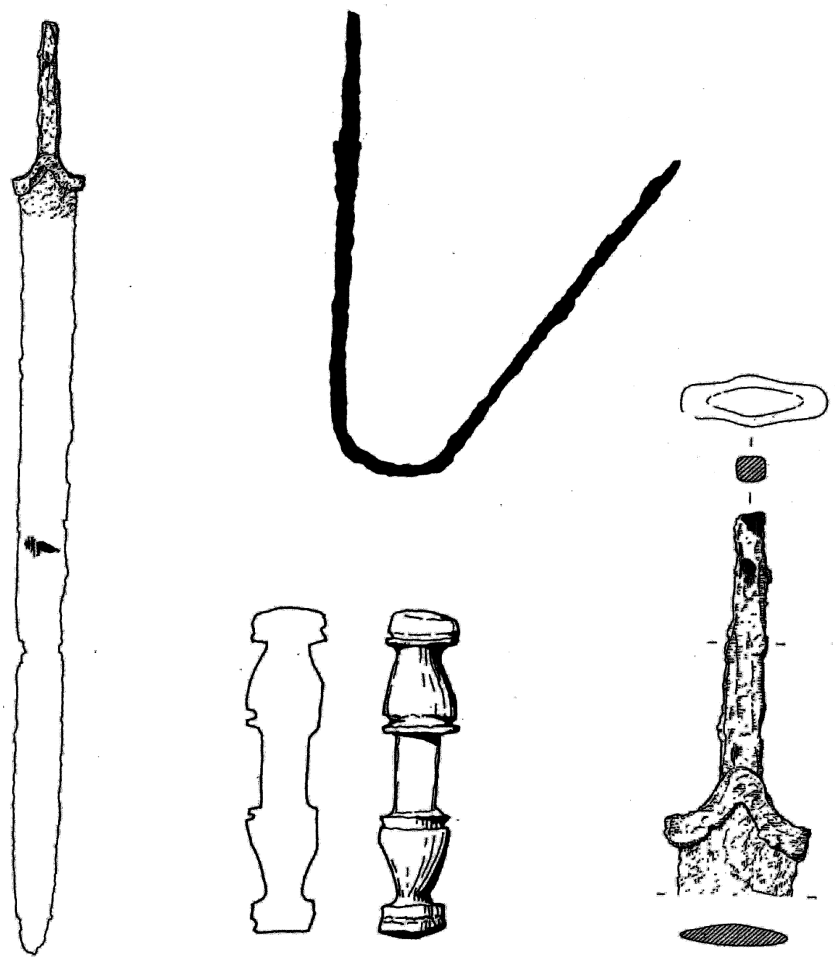


Figure 3. *The bent sword from the Acklam Wold (East Yorkshire) weapons burial and antler toggle. (Drawing: Marcus Abbott, based on Dent 1983, fig. .1)*

disease-wracked life, or an event designed to prick others towards retribution and revenge.

Seizing death?

There are similar examples of dramatic damage to weapons in funerals where the cause of death is less certain. The Mill Hill, Deal 'warrior' (Kent) was buried with sword, scabbard and bronze 'crown' or decorative band (Parfitt 1995). Here, an ox-hide shaped shield, faced with leather and trimmed with copper-alloy edging, was found snapped in two (Garrow & Gosden 2012, 226): bent, folded and broken, before being placed over the body (Garrow & Gosden 2012, 20, fig. 4.9). This moment of destruction would have punctured the funeral with noise, energy and spectacle, dramaturgical effects which may have been designed to expel or ward off evil.

A similar moment of rupture can be seen in the 'speared' burials of East Yorkshire (Stead 1991, 33). A small group of young adult men were interred within the bed of the Gypsey Race (a seasonally vigorous chalk stream) at Garton Station. They were associated with a range of weaponry such as shields and swords. Yet at the moment of back-filling, mourners cast iron and bone-tipped spearheads into the grave, splintering shields, thrusting into the body underneath and pinning it to the chalk gravel, with some spearheads 'perched' higher up in the barrow mound spoil (Giles 2012, 1–2). At Grimthorpe, Mortimer (1905, 151) recorded no fewer than 16 bone-tipped 'lanceheads' under, above and along the length of the corpse. Though he interpreted them as possible shroud pins, the fracturing of their sharpened tips suggest these, too, had been part of a dramatic post-mortem 'spearing' of the corpse. In none of the above cases has a violent cause of death been identified, but the fact that many of them are in the prime of their youth or adulthood suggests their loss, from infection, disease or non-skeletal flesh-wounds, was a crisis to the

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community. They may even have been regarded as having suffered a mysterious 'bad death', initiated through witchcraft or malign intent (see Sharples 2010). As the spears effectively 'stake' these bodies in place, it may represent a form of 'ghost killing' as Aldhouse-Green has argued (2001, 35), suggesting mourners were concerned by the possibility of the dead rising from the grave. The wooden shafts of these spears remained intact in their sockets, suggesting that they would have stuck out of the barrow mound like spines: a monument bristling with intimidation, imprinted vividly on both memory and landscape (Stead 1991; Giles 2012). This was an impressive martial send-off for men who died in their youth before they could fulfill their full potential.

Other weapons burials from Britain demonstrate a similar concern with destruction or damage at the moment of their interment. At Whitcombe (Dorset), a man in his late 20s–early 30s, with a septic open wound at the head of his humerus, was buried with a weighty iron sword and an iron spear whose shaft must have been snapped in two to lie in the grave (Burial 9: Aitken & Aitken 1990, 69). The older man (in his 40s or even 50s) buried at Owslebury (Hampshire), riddled with osteoarthritis in his spine and down much of his lower left-hand side (femur, tibia head and patella), was buried with a sword as well as a shield. A spear had then been jammed into the end of the grave, its shaft fittings suggesting that it, too, had been snapped in half (Collis 1973, 126). No human remains were preserved in the pit at Kelvedon (Essex), from which came an analogous set of damaged weaponry, but it is argued this was also an inhumation (Sealy 2007). The bending of both iron sword and slender iron spearhead to identical 45° angles, as well as the likely snapping in two of the spear shaft at the time of placing them in the ground, tells a similar story of the deliberate wounding of weapons as part of a likely mortuary performance (Sealy 2007, 5–10; Stead 2006, 177). Meanwhile, in an exemplary recent publication of a developer-funded project, Stevenson (2013, 167–8) analyses the strategic planning and performance behind two Iron Age weapons burials at Brisley Farm (Kent). In one burial (BF1), a spear shaft was snapped in two and the blade was thrust or jammed into the outer wall of the grave cut above the body, whilst in the adjacent burial (BF2, possibly made a generation later) the spear blade was bent at right angles before being interred in the grave.

Across these different regional examples, then, we see a common strategy of the deliberate destruction of weaponry and its deployment in radical, rupturing moments of heightened performance. They created a moment of object-centred violence during which onlookers may have been made acutely—perhaps painfully—aware of these individuals' passing. Objects were used as material surrogates for reliving loss, whilst also symbolically binding them to the fate of the deceased. Such performances thus turned corpses into political as well as martial capital, which could be effectively deployed at times of social crises, negotiating danger or inspiring revenge. Out of loss came a renewed vigour and sense of solidarity amongst those left behind. Such rites may have had additional importance: drawing on a twentieth-century ethnographic analogy, the 'Spearmaster' of the Dinka of Southern Sudan must be seen to embrace death in a self-sacrificial rite which achieved victory over death, rather than allowing it to take him (Lienhardt 1961). The shattering of weapons and plunging of blades into the body, or the snapping of spear shafts and bending of blades, may have been a publicly visible and powerful way in which the mourners symbolically 'seized' death on behalf of the deceased, and secured post-mortem honour for their brothers-in-arms.

Crafting theatre

The role of craftspeople in such funerary rites has not been given much thought in prehistoric studies and yet, until very recently, a community's carpenter was also its coffin maker (Rose 2001; Sturt 2001). The extent to which craft skill was allied to other forms of power is a recurrent theme in ethnographic studies by Helms (1993) and Herbert (1993), where transformative skills in this domain are often seen as a proxy for power, or rich source of metaphor and symbolism for authority in the social, political and even religious life (see further arguments in Giles 2007; 2012). In making complex or dazzling objects, craftspeople evidence many of the transformative skills needed to skilfully negotiate major rites of passage. Perhaps, then, we should not be surprised to find them present at funerals.

In the case of the chariot burial at Wetwang Slack (CB1, also known as WS453, East Yorkshire: Dent 1985), it is likely that someone with smithing or woodworking skills carefully removed the iron 'J' shaped linch pins from the axle, eased off the wheels and placed them in the grave (Fig. 4). The yoke was detached from the pole shaft, and (with its coral encrusted terrets still gleaming from the beam of wood) this part of the chariot was placed in front of the body, running parallel with the axis of the corpse. The rein rings were draped over one wheel, and an iron sword, in a worn but beautifully decorated bronze scabbard, was placed alongside his body. A shield was laid boss downwards in the grave, over the corpse: a 'back to

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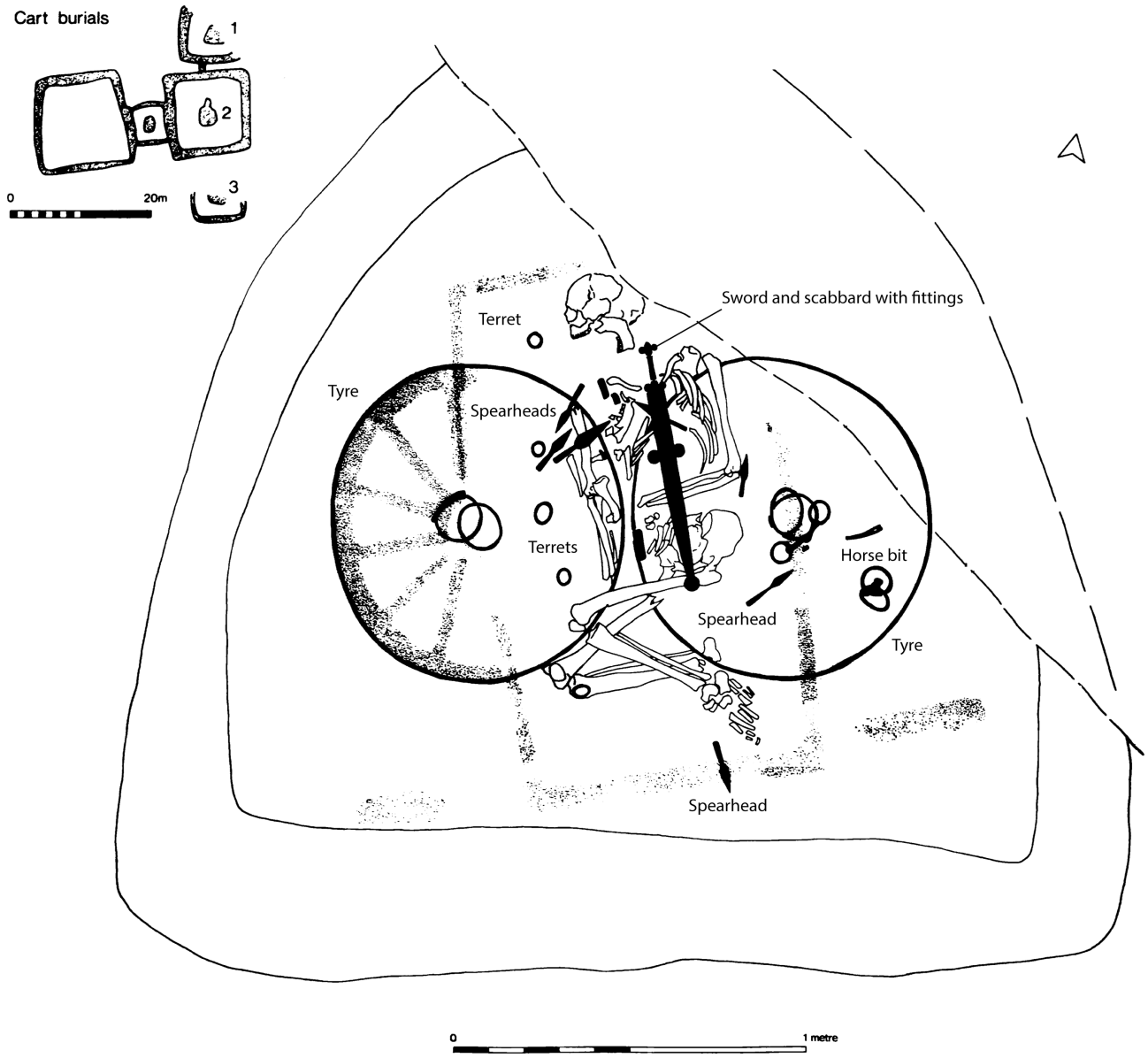


Figure 4. *Wetwang Slack (East Yorkshire) chariot burial 1. (Drawing: Marcus Abbott, based on Dent 1985, fig. 2.)*

front' arrangement that may have been an important part of inverting norms during the funeral rite to assist the deceased's departure (Parker Pearson 1999). The body was either placed in or covered over by the box of the chariot; and at some point, a total of seven iron spearheads were placed in the grave at a variety of angles (Dent 1985), or else 'cast in' as another example of the post-mortem spearing rite (Giles 2012, 187). This individual had a remarkable life history, distinguished by a permanent hole in his head caused by a sharp-force trauma wound from either a sword or an axe (King 2010). He lived for some years beyond this traumatic injury, but as King goes on to argue, perhaps with an altered identity that was prone to violence and disruptive behaviour.

In this burial, as with other chariots in East Yorkshire, the motif of 'unmaking' was performed before the funeral audience through the taking apart of the chariot. An elderly craftsman I spoke to recently commented on the importance of performance in his work, laying out and martialling specialized tools, undergoing preparatory rituals: in his words, it was 'all a bit of theatre!' It is this highly performative aspect of crafting skill and its associated technology which such specialists may have brought to the arena of death. Their ability to 'unmake' things before the watchful

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audience provided a powerful metaphor for death, with enormous symbolic potential. The disassembling of the chariot also enabled mourners to witness the material *and* social components through which the vehicle had been made. By taking this composite vehicle apart, the skein of relations in which the deceased was enmeshed was brought into sharp review (Giles 2012, 249). The performance thus created a controlled ritual framework, providing a structure for grief and mourning and a metonym for death and the dissolving of those connections.

Executing death

The mere presence of weapons in the examples above symbolically evoked the 'eruptive possibility' of violence (Whitehead 2004, 18): yet to be effective, such arms had occasionally to be deployed. In the final category of difficult deaths I want to discuss, violence takes centre stage. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Hughes (2011, 3) argues that 'acts of performed violence which have obliterated life' represent the most radical and terrifying examples of such 'theatre'. Alongside the perpetrators themselves, their armaments and the controlled settings of these deaths, such performances become psychological 'weapons of war' (Hughes 2011, 3). The two Iron Age examples which follow appear to provide evidence of orchestrated killing, literally executed with forethought in terms of the effect they would have on both the victim and other members of the community. It is through the character of these violent performances, and their location, that we can unpick some of the purpose and intent of these acts.

A recent re-evaluation of the human remains from Covesea (Morayshire, Scotland) determined two main phases of deposition. In the Mid–Late Bronze Age, a series of funerary deposits (mainly juvenile) in this cave appear to have been selectively modified, curated and re-arranged around the cave entrance. Whether this amounted to a display or 'gallery' of ancestral bones is less certain (Armit *et al.* 2011, 275). Yet a second group of bones, now dated to the Roman Iron Age (the third century AD) suggest a very different history of death and deposition. At least six individuals (four adults and two children/young adolescents) show evidence of 'cut marks' from a heavy, sharp, thin-bladed weapon, most likely a sword (as there is little evidence of 'crushing' damage expected from an axe blade: Armit *et al.* 2011, 272). These wounds range from single, decisive blows (e.g. HM161) to multiple 'hacking' or 'chopping' marks (e.g. HM160, where up to 11 blows focus on the same site). The consistency of the angle of these blows—from behind the victim, delivered to the left-hand side—suggest these individuals had been ritually executed by an assailant standing to the right-hand side of a kneeling victim, whose head was tipped forward onto their chest. In other words, they appear to be in a position of submission for their inevitable, successive decapitation. Importantly, these killings appear to have happened 'within the cave itself', suggesting the bringing of hostages to the place of their death (Armit *et al.* 2011, 275).

We can only imagine the horror of this event, which was interpreted by the archaeologists as the possible result of a dynastic execution: the removal of a family or close kin group, during turbulent political times. Yet it is clear that the location for these deaths was carefully selected: a secluded, difficult to access, intimidating arena—away from public view, but in sight perhaps of ancestral remains whose skulls watched over these grim proceedings. The presence of such remains in the cave may even have been drawn upon by the executors to intimidate their victims or sanction the extraordinary violence which was to follow.

A similar journey to an inaccessible and dangerous location would have been undertaken by the small group intent on the execution of the Irish bog body known as 'Old Croghan man' (Co. Offaly: Kelly 2006) (Fig. 5). This impressive individual, with powerful arms and large hands, consists entirely of the upper torso of a man, disembowelled and decapitated some time in the middle Iron Age (362–175 BC: Kelly 2013, 234). The remains of his corpse suggest he had been prepared for his death, with carefully manicured fingernails and little evidence of heavy manual work or injury on the skin (Kelly 2013, 235). Evidence of a last meal of buttermilk and finely milled barley was found in his stomach, and the corpse was naked apart from a small plaited band of leather with copper alloy fittings, around his upper left arm (Mulhall & Briggs 2007, 73). He had apparently been killed by a deep stab wound to the chest which punctured the lung, a blow he tried to ward off, suggested by a defensive wound to the left arm. Post-mortem, the corpse was not only severed into different elements, but his nipples were cleanly sliced through, in what Kelly (2013, 239) has interpreted as an act of symbolic severance of sacral kingship, decommissioning this guardian of the land and provider to its people. Finally, the upper torso was lowered into the bog and pinned in place with withy 'spancel bands'—objects normally used to hobble cattle for milking and prevent straying— interpreted as a functional and symbolic object with which to tether and bind him in place (Kelly 2013, 237). His death is interpreted by

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Figure 5. *(Colour online) Old Croghan Man (Co. Offaly). Part of the 'Kingship and Sacrifice' exhibition. (Photograph: © and courtesy of the National Museum of Ireland.)*

Kelly (2013, 235) as a ritual killing, *not* an execution, and thus a rare example of 'sanctified violence' (Ralph 2013, 7). Whether a scapegoat figure or judicial victim, failed king or even willing emissary at a time of crisis (see Giles 2009), this was another shocking event.

In both of the above cases, the beheading of the body (and further dismemberment) formed the climax of a ritualized killing. In historic times, such acts have been interpreted as mimesis of wider political crises, signalling contests over the body and the removal of signs of personhood, focussed on the primary site of both identity and experience (Hughes 2011, 40). In Hughes' words (2011, 43), what is being performed through beheading 'is the power to materialize a reality in which some lives are inside, and other lives are outside a recognizable, rule-bound and protective order'. The act of decapitation is both a manifestation of the power to make and unmake bodies: a violent excision of such individuals from the known world. In Hughes' words (2011, 193), this serves to 'stall a threatening and violent world' *through* expulsion. The deposition of these fragmented remains on socio-political boundaries (Kelly 2013) or liminal locales (which may have been seen as portals to the world of spirits and ancestors: Giles 2009) was important, reinforcing such thresholds through appropriate offerings or sacrifices. Yet in the Celtic world, decapitation need not have been a mark of disdain or humiliation. The head had vital symbolic capital for Iron Age people (Armit 2012). In many regions, skulls were venerated, curated and displayed, as well as being the focus of artistic representation and adornment or framing using styling of the hair (Aldhouse-Green 2004), helmets and head-dresses (Parfitt 1995) or objects such as torcs (Garrow & Gosden 2012). Decapitation could be an acknowledgement of someone's power, whether enemy, sacrificial victim or honoured emissary, and performances involving such remains may be a complex mix of triumph, fear, awe and continued respect for the powerful dead. Such rites may strike *us* as callous, but it seems likely they were framed within a different ontological understanding of violence and the body, framed by concepts of

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honour and renown earned in death (see, for example, Robb 2008).

Conclusion

This article has reviewed a variety of examples of difficult death from Iron Age Britain and Ireland, brought about through traumatic childbirth, disease, violent injury and deliberate killing. Such bodies—whether beloved relatives or sworn enemies, local heroes, captives or offerings to the gods—represented potentially malevolent or distressed beings, whose passage into the afterlife was a matter of utmost concern. Analogous dramatic send-offs involving weapons suggest these men, too, may have suffered untimely or misfortunate deaths, and the funerals of this particular age, gender or skill set required similar care to effect an honourable departure of the deceased. In all cases, the successful orchestration of these performances was paramount, becoming a source of respect and power for those officiating at such events.

Through analysing the spatial, relational and material dimensions of a range of case studies, I have suggested that particular strategies were used to negotiate such traumatic deaths. In the case of the loss of close kin, moments of theatre that exposed the frailty and fragility of the body were designed to move onlookers by 'placing the body in relation to those of others' (Pearson & Shanks 2001, 120). Whether this was the tender dressing of the mother's corpse with luminous articles or the covering of a wounded or diseased body with a chariot box, such moments connected people to the deceased: 'intensify[ing] the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries' (Scarry 2011, 57). Bodies were covered, bound, staked or pinned, in acts which suggest that the immobilizing of the corpse offered vital reassurance that they were under the control of the living. Carefully crafted moments of intimacy then clashed with those of dramatic rupture—'extremes of energy ... sudden, unexpected changes in direction, emphasis, rhythm'—which shocked and refocused the audience (Pearson & Shanks 2001, 27). Symbolic re-wounding (the piercing of the corpse and its protective shield with spears or surrogate damage to objects) achieved this goal. In contrast, the ritual preparation of bodies destined for execution or sacrifice created a temporal arc suddenly punctuated by heart-stopping, shocking and swelling moments of adrenalizing drama. Through both kinds of performance (bloody and violent though some may have been), the living became implicated in what can be regarded as a *creative* rather than simply destructive act, through which a fitting end could be shaped, and grief or responsibility shared. Drama and rupture was complemented with intimate moments of bodily attention. The two strategies worked vividly upon an audience—re-injuring through visceral loss, and working to give space to grief—putting an end to things, and re-imagining a future.

All deaths in such small-scale, later prehistoric societies jeopardized the continuity of the community and its spiritual well-being, but traumatic death posed a particular threat. Drawing upon recent performative theory, this analysis has identified how trauma might be dealt with through the moving poetics of intimate care, ruptures of anger or piercing explosions of grief. Many of these ceremonies achieved both: acknowledging the destructive and creative forces of the world, as a means of facing the future and enduring the likelihood of them happening again.

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Melanie Giles
Archaeology, Mansfield Cooper Building
University of Manchester
Oxford Road
Manchester M13 9PL
UK
Email: melanie.giles@manchester.ac.uk

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Author biography

Melanie Giles is a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Manchester. She specializes in the Iron Age, particularly the theme of death and burial. Her publications include *Iron Age Bog Bodies of Northern Europe: Representing the past* (2009) and *A Forged Glamour: Landscape, identity and material culture in the Iron Age* (2012).

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