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New Book Chronicle

Encountering the dead in the past and the present

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Burials and funerary monuments are a main source for archaeological research and their exploration can bring us much closer to understanding people in the distant past. They can deliver insights into the social, political and religious structure of a society as well as its belief systems.

The rapid development of techniques in the field of bioarchaeology as well as decolonisation in archaeology is part of a renewal in thinking about and investigating mortuary archaeology. As researchers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were influenced heavily by Christian theology, much of the interpretation of the funerary practices of past cultures, such as the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Maya, need now to be decolonised and critically reviewed within their own context. Bioarchaeology now allows a much closer investigation of human remains; results of biological gender, age and family ties can be firmly determined. By 'stepping back' and trying to look at the funerary evidence through a less biased lens and alongside the new techniques, it is hoped that we will find new ways to understand certain ritual behaviours at certain sites and in societies. It will perhaps also reveal universal human behaviours when caring for the dead. However, many rituals will remain invisible in the archaeological record, and literary and textual sources also have their limitations.

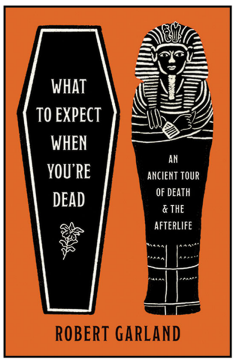
The four examples chosen for this New Book Chronicle are only a small sample from the many recent publications. The first book *What to expect when you're dead: an ancient tour of death and the afterlife* is an apt starting point and collects a wide range of knowledge on the treatment of the dead. The two following books are both PhD theses with set research questions on mortuary practices, one on *The identity at death of the old and young from the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages on the Southeast Asian mainland* and the other which compares Iron Age burials in two cemeteries in Switzerland and deposition of human remains in the adjoined settlement in *Umgang mit den Toten*. The final book is, like the first, a deep dive into time and space to explore *Killing the dead: vampire epidemics from Mesopotamia to the New World.*

All four go far beyond 'simple mortuary archaeology' of excavation reports and burial interpretations on social hierarchy but examine and discuss human behaviour when confronted with death and incorporate archaeothanatological practices. Death has always been an intriguing topic for humankind and it is telling that probably the oldest piece of literature, the epic of Gilgamesh, deals both with death and the wish for immortality. We have come far since Gilgamesh but are no closer to immortality. In fact, people today, especially in western societies, feel more removed from death and the dead are separate from the living, which was very different in the past but also in some recent communities where death was/is omnipresent.

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Robert Garland. 2025. ***What to expect when you're dead: an ancient tour of death and the afterlife.*** Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 978-0-691-26617-6 hardback £25.



Robert Garland serves up an entertainingly broad sweep across ancient cultures to compare funerary practices and tease out differences and more often common threads, to get closer to the question of what to expect when you are dead. In a sometimes sobering and often humorous but always respectful, tone, the dead and what was done to them are being reviewed. A wealth of knowledge and information is comprised within the pages as well as brought to life by the voices of many ancient authors. The easy-to-read style is aimed at anyone wanting to know how humans dealt with death in the past but also delivers food for thought for scholars, who usually are experts in some, but not all, of the ancient societies discussed here.

The Introduction briefly highlights the beliefs concerning death and the dead in the ancient cultures compared in this book: Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Hindu, Jewish, Zoroastrian, Etruscan, Greek, Roman, Early Christian and Islam. Together with further examples from other cultures reaching as far back as the Palaeolithic and forward to our time, the topics are not discussed diachronically but rather concentrate on different topics, one discussed in each of the 10 chapters. Given the broad scope in time and space considered, beliefs about death are examined through samples to illuminate patterns and deliver a narrative, rather than being addressed in detailed societal studies.

'How humans came to believe in an afterlife' is explored through themes of the earliest care for the dead body, possibly already found in Neanderthal burials, and when an understanding that death is the end of life dawns. It also highlights the quests for immortality, perceived as a trademark of the gods, and the accounts of people overcoming death. The next chapter gathers facts on what was seen as a good death and what preparations were needed to have one. Here a common theme is the pre-meditated course of what happens to your worldly belongings and sometimes your place of last rest. An orderly inheritance, though differently distributed in the various cultures, is an important issue for the dying person. As today, the death of young people and children was felt hard across cultures and seen as a reminder of one's mortality, though death at old age was seen as a good time to move on.

From the dying, the perspective moves to what happens right after life has left the body and what is often described as the spirit or soul being 'Between two worlds'. Most commonly the three steps of laying out the body, the funeral and the interment were followed, as is still the case in many societies today. The main difference is that nowadays the dead body is quickly removed to be prepared by professionals, whereas in

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antiquity they remained mostly in the family home. At or after the funeral a meal is shared among the mourners. The reasons for this come mostly down to honouring the dead and establishing social ties. The deceased or their soul was now ready for the last journey, thought to be helped sometimes by boats or otherworldly beings. Taking it again to another level, the Egyptians needed guidance about the exact steps with a 'book of the dead' given to them as a grave gift. The 'Postmortem judgment' they received is also a common thread in the belief systems and conveniently helped to guide or control (the living) people, as they were made accountable in death for deeds during their lives. Most cultures display signs of a belief in a dualism of body and spirit, as well as some sort of afterlife that, after the 'judgement day', will lead to places like 'Heaven and hell', the theme for the next chapter. But not all cultures saw the otherworld divided into these opposing places, and this trend seems to come up rather in Late Antiquity and medieval times whereas the Egyptians and Etruscans believed in an afterlife much like the real life, just better.

'Things to do when you're dead' explores what past people thought their life after death will be like, such as, will you have a body or 'just' a spiritual form, can you eat and drink, have feelings or social status, or have a purpose? The diversity of these thoughts and beliefs in the various cultures are a sign of humanity's creativity and are often surprising (as will be most likely what each one of us will experience after death—or not).

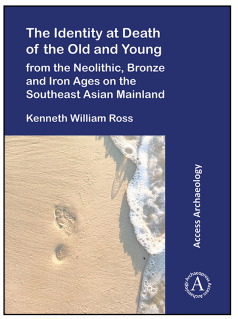
What happens to the body after death is important in most societies discussed here. 'How to dispose of the body' looks at the main funerary customs of cremation, inhumation and open-air exposure (such as excarnation) and collects reasons for the different customs in the various cultures. The following chapter, 'Where to deposit the remains', reviews where the dead were interred. It explores the possible reasons why this was either near the family home, or further away in a centralised cemetery, with the mortuary structures sometimes used to promote the dead and their family. 'Living with the dead' is concerned with the after care of the dead and their places of rest, and the contact with the dead, which was strictly forbidden in some beliefs and seen as a must in others, and where the ancestors were remembered and honoured, e.g. through offerings.

Reading the many quotes from past observers, it is evident that the topic of death was often encountered with humour and scepticism towards certain belief systems, clearly an inspiration for Garland himself. In the end the book does not give a conclusive answer to what to expect in the afterlife—as no one can say for obvious reasons—but it delivers a colourful panoply of the ideas ancient people had about it. The end note is clear: what comes after death remains uncertain for all of us but it is most important that one should fill one's life with joy. This reader enjoyed the book very much indeed and can recommend it fully.

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Kenneth William Ross. 2025. *The identity at death of the old and young from the Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Ages on the Southeast Asian mainland*. Oxford: Archaeopress; 978-1-80583-062-7 paperback £65. OpenAccess https://www.archaeopress.com/Archaeopress/Products/9781805830627



The book is the outcome of PhD research by Kenneth Ross and is concerned with funerary remains from four prehistoric cemeteries in Thailand. The main question of the investigation is whether the old and young deceased can be discerned from the general mortuary rites and if the biological-age identity is reflected in a social differentiation and therefore reflects an identity-at-death and a society structured by age cohorts.

The Introduction sets the framework and explains aims and objectives of the dissertation. The following two chapters deliver the theoretical engagement with the background to the main biosocial questions. Chapter 2 is concerned with why funerary archaeology is so important to understand past communities and argues for the great potential that burial remains and mortuary structures have, to identify contact between deceased and mourners and give insights into sociocultural rituals. Furthermore, the impact the dead had on the living as well as psychological and emotional effects of grief and mourning are discussed. The third chapter looks first at the biological side of ageing and further evaluates the trends in bioarchaeology connected with this research: gender, age and ageing. Previous works on gendered and age-related archaeology in Thailand are summarised; it emerges that the older age group has yet not been explored in depth. Chapter 4 highlights the wider Southeast Asian context and reviews previous cemetery research in the region, especially those with an emphasis on the young and/or old. The four cemetery sites are introduced, altogether around 800 burials dating from the Neolithic (2000 BC–1500 BC) and Bronze Age (1500 BC–500 BC) to the Iron Age (500 BC–AD 500), and excavations, finds and results are summarised. Khok Phanom Di near the south coast is a mounded Neolithic site with settlement and mortuary layers. The other three sites are not far apart from each other, all situated in the upper Mun River valley in Northeast Thailand. Ban Non Wat is a large, mounded site with occupation evidence from the Neolithic through to the Iron Age and has evidence for 12 mortuary phases. Ban Lum Khao is a Bronze Age cemetery, and 110 burials were excavated. Noen U-Loke is another large, mounded site, dating to the Iron Age with occupation and mortuary phases.

The next chapter describes the material available for study and which methods and analyses were used to gain results. Each burial is researched for details, such as mortuary structure, orientation of body, location in cemetery, grave goods (ceramic, shells, fauna etc.), health, age and gender. Chapters 6 to 9 discuss these results for each of the four cemeteries and what they mean for the site itself, whereas Chapter 10 connects the results with the help of Generalised Linear Modelling to explore some changes in the variables across the Neolithic, Bronze Age and Iron Age. Though no clear or absolute set of factors could be distinguished to show the different treatment of young (here under 15 years) or old people (here over 40 years) among the

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buried, but some trends become visible. Based on all the results, Chapter 11 places the age-identity question in the larger Southeast Asia area whereas Chapter 12 explores their potential for the Resilience and Regionality theories that are employed as models of social development in Southeast Asia.

Although age can be detected as a marker for different treatment (mortuary structure, orientation and grave goods), biological sex seems to be less important for most of the grave assemblages. Some cases show age differences between very young and older children but most discernible is the threshold between subadults and adults; towards the older group there are changes apparent, but they show much variability.

The text is at times quite cumbersome, wordy and repetitive with a strong theoretical tone, perhaps due to the dissertation format. A bit of editing would have made the book more accessible and clearer for a wider audience. Ross though delivers a comprehensive analysis of mortuary behaviour in Southeast Asia: he crunched a huge amount of diverse data for his core questions and correlated it into a cohesive result to establish simultaneously a picture of 'normative' burials in the research region, from which burials of young and old people to some level divert. The results deliver ideas for future research, including questions about gender and the gaining of more insights on the death and life perceived by past communities.

Hannele Rissanen. 2025. *Umgang mit den Toten: Analyse der Bestattungspraxis in der jüngeren Latènezeit anhand des Fundortes Basel-Gasfabrik* (Materialhefte zur Archäologie in Basel 27). Basel: Archäologische Bodenforschung des Kantons Basel-Stadt; 978-3-905098-74-7 hardback CHF 60. OpenAccess https//doi.org/10.12685/mh.27.2025.1-405



Burials are one of the main sources of 'material' for archaeologists to study and understand past communities. Publications on cemeteries, tombs and burial grounds are plentiful and more appear every year, many now also including legacy collections and old excavations. The book *Umgang mit den Toten (Dealing with the dead)* by Hannele Rissanen is an excellent example of how to achieve a modern and multifaceted version of the well-studied topic of funerary rites. The research stems from her PhD thesis which is part of the larger interdisciplinary project 'Über die Toten zu den Lebenden' (Through the dead to the living) which looks at the site of Basel-Gasfabrik, Switzerland, with further results being published in due course (Über die Toten zu den Lebenden | Archäologische Fundstelle Basel-Gasfabrik). This study investigates the burials in two cemeteries (Gräberfeld A & B) and the skeletal remains unearthed in pits and wells in the adjacent area of the settlement, which together deliver insights in diverse funerary practices and how the dead were treated in the Late La Tène period (*c.* 150–1 BC). The bioanthropological report of the human remains is undertaken by Sandra Pichler.

The site of Basel-Gasfabrik sits on the lowest level terraces down by the river and is situated close to the striking Rhine knee at Basel, a ninety-degree bend in the river

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where it cuts through the mountains and hills. The extensive Introduction highlights this geographical setting, informs about the ongoing larger project and the excavations that have taken place so far (spanning over 100 years), sets the framework and explains the methods and aim of this work. Furthermore, a theoretical reflection, incorporating thanatological thoughts, on how humans treat their dead and how archaeological material could and should be analysed, shows a critical exploration and the engagement that the author applies to her research.

The main part of the volume is the detailed analyses of the two cemeteries A and B, where records and materials of old and new excavations are diligently correlated and contexts and finds described, all examined by interdisciplinary studies. Finds are mainly made from ceramics, metals (mostly fibulas) and glass. In cemetery A 169 graves were unearthed, for the main part during early excavations (1915–1917), whereas in cemetery B only 27 graves were dug, most of them in the more recent excavations (2005–2007). Therefore, the documentation and data differ for both areas. The graves, dug into the soil and without signs of a coffin, show little variability in size, depth and orientation (even children were placed in adult sized graves). Inhumations are the rule, and on a few occasions, cremations were present, with one grave containing both. Age, gender and status of the buried are discussed for the cases where the human remains and the grave goods can be consulted. All members of a population were present, from children to old people. Next to and around the graves were some ditches and pits, partly belonging to a larger ditch system. Some contained further finds of bones (some human) and ceramic.

These 'regular' burial contexts are compared in the next chapter with human remains in pits and wells in the nearby settlement area, some with complete skeletons (around 29 individuals) some with partial skeletons and hundreds of single bones (of these approximately 100 are individual skull or jaw parts). Again, old and new excavation results are evaluated and carefully put together to gain as much knowledge as possible, but the older ones deliver less secure data due to the difference in technical expertise and excavation standards. Three of the seven wells in the settlement contained burials. In one exceptional case, Brunnen 114, nine skeletons were found: an old woman, two adults, five children of mixed ages and one foetus were buried together. Most of the children show stressmarkers on their bones (a sign for illness or malnutrition) and at least three of them were killed by blunt force to the head.

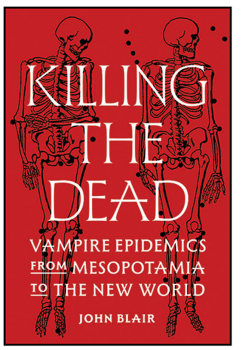
The diversity of funerary practices and the treatment of the dead are comparable with the wider practices performed in neighbouring contemporary areas. The synthesis chapter compares the diverse burial practices in both the settlement and the cemeteries of Basel-Gasfabrik to give new insights into what can be defined as 'regular' and 'special' burials and who is buried in which. A normal population (all ages, both genders) is buried in the cemeteries; in the settlement, it is similar apart from there are fewer children under 14 years. The remains in the settlement also show a higher percentage of peri- and postmortem violence, especially on isolated skulls of males, but apart from this there appears to be no difference in the nutrition, mobility and status in both groups of buried people. The interpretation of the funerary rites is always grounded and never reaching for speculations, which is refreshing, especially given the opportunity for sensationalism of the more unusual assemblages.

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The content is completed with the plates of finds, detailed catalogues of the graves and bioanthropological finds from the settlement, radiocarbon dates of graves with no finds and the usual appendices. The text is written in German, but with summaries in English and French, as well as the throughout clear and well-presented illustrations and Open Access publishing, the book should be accessible to a wider audience. It deserves wider attention, as much thought and detailed analyses has gone into this solid local study which is integrated to the larger setting of the Late Iron Age world: the result exceeds a traditional excavation report with catalogue by far.

John Blair. 2025. ***Killing the dead: vampire epidemics from Mesopotamia to the New World.*** Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press; 978-0-691-22479-4 hardback £30.



After the books discussed above, this publication is concerned with unusual treatments of the dead, mostly after they have been buried. John Blair, usually at home in the Anglo-Saxon world, traces the phenomenon of 'killing the dead' across the globe, with a focus on Europe. He delves deeply back through time and across disciplines to find out more about the reasons why people in the past believed in 'dangerous dead' coming out of their graves to harm the living. Many rather gruesome and perhaps baffling facts (as well as images) and case studies are gathered from written sources and archaeological material combined with anthropological, theological and psychological research. Fictional vampires known to many today, such as Count Dracula, are not the focus, as their modern image is already much discussed and departs greatly from what past people believed to be 'vampires'. The restless dead who cause mayhem to the living and withdraw something from them (blood, life or soul) are the subject of this investigation.

This is a big (and brilliant) book with over 400 pages of text—eloquently written—plus notes, bibliography and index, and is organised in six parts with 34 chapters plus Introduction and Conclusion. Part 1 is an extended introduction to the topic and explores the different named phenomena and suggests definitions for a clearer understanding of these constructed imaginations of dangerous dead and what people believed them to be. In many cultures, the crucial time is when the dead body is between worlds (as above in Garland 2025), recently deceased but not yet buried. This is regulated by certain funerary rituals. Blair finds that troubled dead can be found when a ritual has gone wrong or a life has been cut short and the journey to the other side is left incomplete. These restless dead are then often reportedly seen scaring or harming the living and can only be stopped by disabling the corpse. The book also explores if the fear of or anxiety about dead bodies is innate to human nature and what circumstances and beliefs may have shaped whole societies in the past to believe the walking dead are among us. This can have had many reasons, often sociocultural or religious ones, and were often connected to radical changes, traumatic wars and outbreaks of diseases. Blair finds the dangerous dead often get blamed for these changes, and in return harming the dead

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gives the people a scapegoat and an outlet for their feeling of impotence and allows them 'to do something' in the face of change and adversity.

Source criticism and what to look for in the written texts is discussed with primary significance placed on understanding the plethora of textual evidence, which readers will find often to be weird and peculiar (from our modern perspective). The archaeological material mainly can be termed 'deviant burials' of which there are plenty in all shapes and forms across time and space. Yet it first needs to be determined how one could tell apart an abnormal burial from a disturbed and revisited one. It is done here in detail, beginning with the different stages of bodily decay, and listing some of the 'countermeasures' to stop bodies from coming back, such as impaling, decapitation or the cutting off of the feet.

Part II 'Dynamics' researches how these beliefs of the dangerous dead first manifested and spread or independently developed and how they were visualised in different cultures. At different times and in different regions, a gender seems to be more attached to the restless dead, and they are certainly not always men. For example, the *Yoginî* demons in India, lustful, beautiful, shapeshifting women, giving enlightenment to a selected few but eating the incompetent and ordinary. They seem to be connected to the Chinese *huli jing*, who are also shapeshifters, here between a fox and an erotic woman, who were also thought to devour men. This wide sweep into cultural traditions and their diffusion leads over to a diachronical review in Part III 'From the ancient Middle East to the early medieval North'. Evidence from as early as 1200 BC in Mesopotamia to early medieval England is collected, and Part IV and V concentrate on Europe from the high Middle Ages to early modern times. What emerges from this overview is a cultural geography of beliefs in the dangerous dead, with the innovative engaging suggestion of a 'vampire belt' spanning Europe, Asia and Australia (map 1 on p.18). The final Part VI brings us to 'The modern world: towards folklore and fiction' and finishes with a picture of a Haitian man in 1982, believing he is an undead, sitting on his own grave.

Blair gathers an enormous amount of knowledge to beautifully piece together evidence for vampire epidemics, meaning times in which people in the past (and to the present day) believed in the existence of dangerous or restless dead that had to be stopped by maiming or dismembering the dead body, and that this behaviour was not an exception. Furthermore, the historical backgrounds of these recurring episodes can be distinguished and offer some explanation on how and why these beliefs developed. I admit the great trove of information makes it hard to summarise and review in brief—and I do fully recommend a whole read—but, overall, Blair convincingly connects sociocultural and traumatic events with the emergence and growth of the phenomenon of dangerous dead who can be blamed for such events, instead of turning to groups of outcast or minorities (which also happened). In short: "corpse-killing is mainstream and not marginal, therapeutic not pathological" (p.437).

Though sometimes quite foreign and a bit macabre for my modern western mind, the stories of the past do strike a chord, and deliver insightful understandings of, and connection to, societies from the distant past to more recent days, where science has ended most beliefs in the restless dead. In the instances of epidemic vampirism and dangerous dead, it can be concluded that "killing the dead is better than killing the living" (p.6).

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