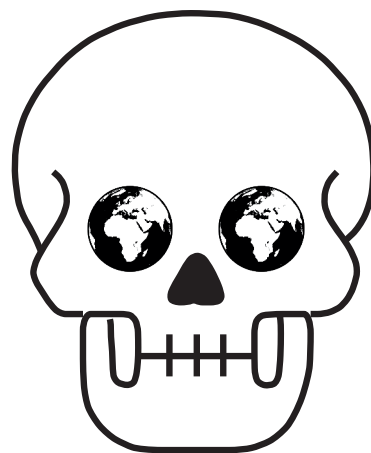


# Interdisciplinary Dialogues on Death Rituals: Materializing the Absent

16.–17.09.2021

Room F-122 and F-112  
Lerchenweg 36 (Unitobler)  
3012 Bern (Switzerland)



Death can be understood as a socially transformative process which is to be regulated by funerary practices. The material results of these intentional and structured actions – often conceptualized as rituals – are, among others, burial sites, graves and their contents. In this context, objects are often used to support the transformational processes. Material culture can therefore be understood as a form of communication. Its functions and meanings are not static but depend on the context and can form a complex relationship with ideologies and actions. Human remains, too, are a part of this material culture, as they can be used as objects within burial practices and become means of expression.

Archaeologically, only the materialization of burial rituals can be recorded by analyzing human remains and other objects found in the context of burials. The corresponding functions and meanings must then be interpreted using historical, ethnological, and sociological analogies. From a religious studies perspective it is possible to perceive how the bodily remains of a deceased person can become the focus not only of veneration or remembrance, but also of self-focused religious development. These studies, however, due to their abundance of options, often neglect the material culture, which is the main focus of archaeological research. An interdisciplinary

dialogue between archaeological sciences and religious studies will therefore open opportunities for both sides to learn from each other and come to new perspectives.

The aim of this workshop is to look at the significance of objects as they are created in the interaction of human beings and materials. In order to understand the functions and meanings of burial practices and burial sites, objects should be approximated to the physical as well as the social context they are part of. Social sciences and the humanities can witness historical and contemporary burial rites with additional tools, such as narratives and ethnological participation.

Contributions to the workshop will therefore focus on:

- archaeological aspects such as intentionality, ritual sequences, spatial arrangement, typology and physical characteristics;
- social or historical aspects such as religious practices and beliefs, political structures, social influences, and narrative cultures;
- analyses of salient case studies using methods from both social studies / humanities and archaeology;
- theoretical considerations on the possibilities and limits of incorporating social scientific / historical theories into archaeology, or vice versa.

# Timetable

## Thursday, 16.09.2021

- 09.00–09.15 Walk in
- 09.15–09.40 Welcome by Jens Schlieter and Albert Hafner, Institute for the Science of Religion and Institute of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bern
- 09.40–10.00 Introduction by the organizers: Sarah Perez, Noah Steuri and Bastiaan van Rijn
- 10.00–11.40 Changes in Funerary Customs**
- 10.05–10.30 Katharina Rebay-Salisbury: Inhumation & Cremation: Bodies, Graves and Objects in the Bronze Age
- 10.30–10.55 Amelie Alterauge: Crypt Burials in Germany – Changes of Funerary Customs, Body Treatment, and Attitudes to Death
- 10.55–11.20 Sam Hooker: Home Death Care Through the Lens of Kristeva's Powers of Horror
- 11.20–11.40 Discussion
- 11.40–11.55 *Break*
- 11.55–13.45 Social Practices Surrounding the Deceased**
- 12.00–12.25 Oskar Terš: From Ossuaries to Mummy Show – Touristic Enhancement of Central European Places by Rediscovering or Redesigning Rooms for the Dead
- 12.25–12.50 Franziska Fecher: Burial Rites and Ritual Feasting in Pre-Hispanic Honduras
- 12.50–13.15 Lilo Ruther: Materializing the Absent in Death Rituals Outside of Religious Communities
- 13.15–13.45 Discussion
- 13.45–14.45 *Lunch*
- 14.45–16.25 Signs for Beliefs and Evidence for Funerary Practices**
- 14.50–15:15 Emma Pomeroy: The Challenges of Interpreting Mortuary/Funerary Behaviour in the Palaeolithic: Insights from Shanidar Cave (Iraqi Kurdistan)
- 15.15–15.40 Sarah Tarlow: Belief and Bodies in Early Modernity
- 15.40–16.05 Jens Schlieter: Absence
- 16.05–16.25 Discussion
- 16.25–18.05 New Approaches to Studying Graves and the Dead**
- 16.30–16.55 Fredrik Ekengren: Probing the Multimodality of Graves: Scenes, Spectators and Visual Engagement
- 16.55–17.20 Daniel Robins: The Material Agency of the Dead Body
- 17.20–17.45 Michaela Wisler: Human Remains as Religious Objects? A Point of View from Science of Religion
- 17.45–18.05 Discussion
- 19.00 *Dinner*

## Friday, 17.09.2021

- 09.30–11.15 Grave Goods, Social Status and Transformations**
- 09.35–10.00 Jessica Ryan-Despraz: Ideology and Function: An Anthropological Approach to Assessing the Links between Warfare and Social Status During the Bell Beaker Period
- 10.00–10.25 Matthieu Honegger: Social Relations and Inequalities Through Funerary Rites: The Example of the Royal Necropolis of Kerma
- 10.25–10.50 Melanie Augstein: The Manipulation of Grave Goods as Means of Transformation or Enchainment
- 10.50–11.10 Discussion
- 11.10–11.30 *Break*
- 11.30–13.00 Interdisciplinary Approaches to Studying Burials and the Dead**
- 11.35–12.00 Gino Caspari/Marco Milella: The Kokel of Southern Siberia – Interdisciplinary Insights into Funerary Rituals of a Pastoralist Steppe Community
- 12.00–12.25 Noah Steuri: Examining the Multiplicity of Burial Practices within Neolithic Stone Cist Graves in the Western Alpine Region
- 12.25–12.50 Sarah Perez, Bastiaan van Rijn: Confronting Death: Inspiring Innovation Through Interdisciplinary Dialogues
- 12.50–13.10 Discussion
- 13.15–13.25 Final Words by the organizers: Sarah Perez, Noah Steuri and Bastiaan van Rijn
- 13.30–14.00 *Goodbye Lunch (optional)*
- 14.00 *Walk through Bern (optional)*

# Abstracts

10.05–10.30

Katharina Rebay-Salisbury, Austrian Archaeological Institute, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna (Austria)

## **Inhumation & Cremation: Bodies, Graves and Objects in the Bronze Age**

During the Middle to Late Bronze Age, burial practices changed in most of Europe from inhumation to cremation. This change of burial practices took place at different times in different regions, but broadly happened during the latter part of the second millennium BC in Central Europe. In this contribution, I will discuss general trends in how this transformation took place. I will discuss changing attitudes to handling the material body, the temporality of funerary rituals, the construction of resting places and the role of objects in graves. Case studies will include the cemetery of Pitten, the largest Middle bronze Age cemetery in Austria, as well as Inzersdorf and Franzhausen-Kokoron, which are part of the FWF-funded project "Unlocking the secrets of cremated remains".

10.30–10.55

Amelie Alterauge, Institute of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bern (Switzerland)

## **Crypt Burials in Germany – Changes of Funerary Customs, Body Treatment, and Attitudes to Death**

The aim of this paper on crypt burials is to provide an overview on past research projects and current trends in German crypt archaeology. Over the last three decades, several crypts throughout Germany have been documented, usually in the context of church renovations. The growing body of evidence reveals temporal changes in burial practices, reflecting a changing attitude towards death. Differences between Catholic and Protestant burials have been recognized regarding the crypt's location, coffin decorations as well as the grave goods. The coffin inscriptions as well as the garments show chronological changes as well as individual preferences from the 17th to 19th century, most distinctive in the children burials. Faith in God and hope of resurrection remain constant attitudes to death, but familial affiliation becomes an important factor in early modern noble burials.

10.55–11.20

Sam Hooker, Centre for Death and Society, University of Bath (United Kingdom)

## **Home Death Care Through the Lens of Kristeva's Powers of Horror**

Approaching the materiality of death from a social sciences perspective, my research centers on caring for the dead body in the home by family and friends after death (also known as home death care, home funerals or DIY funerals). This rarely happens in the UK, where I am based, however there is a growing grassroots movement promoting home death care. In this paper I will consider home death care in light of Kristeva's Powers of Horror in which she deems the corpse to instill a reaction of abjection (disgust or horror) in the observer caused by the corpse lying on the boundary between being subject and object, reminding the observer of their own materiality.

12.00–12.25

Oskar Terš, Institute for German Philology, University of Greifswald (Germany)

## **From Ossuaries to Mummy Show – Touristic Enhancement of Central European Places by Rediscovering or Redesigning Rooms for the Dead**

The Murten Ossuary, just a few miles west of Bern, was perhaps one of the first Swiss destinations of what is now called „thanatourism“ or „dark tourism.“ And, as is often the case today, it was not spared by vandalism. One of the many visitors wrote once that he stole „a piece of skull from the Burgundians.“ That visitor was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in 1779. Thanatourism is often seen as the playground of today's oversaturated tourism, for people who seek excitements off the beaten path out of a thrill for fear. While the Murten Ossuary was not specifically intended to become a tourist object of interest, but originally served as a mere memorial to the battle against the Burgundians, it is apparent that in recent decades sites of the dead are being rediscovered or renovated to function as places of tourist interest, such as the Jesuit catacombs of Klatovy and the mummies therein. However, this strategy, designed to attract taphophile tourists, is not a contemporary strategy; rather, it is a human interest in the ephemerality of the body. The presentation will analyze the phenomenon of thanatourism as well as show, by means of concrete examples in Europe, the different directions it has taken over the centuries.

12.25–12.50

Franziska Fecher, Department of Archaeology, Prehistoric Archaeology Division, University of Zürich (Switzerland)

## **Burial Rites and Ritual Feasting in Pre-Hispanic Honduras**

Excavations at the coastal settlement of Guadalupe (AD 900–1525), northeast Honduras, recently uncovered evidence of festivities held in association with burials. An integral part of these feasts was the consumption of food and drinks, the remains of which were deposited in the vicinity of the burials. These festivities were carried out repeatedly, resulting in the accumulation of a dense concentration of ceramics, bones and other objects over time. The presentation discusses the extent to which parallels can be drawn between the archaeological record and ethnographic sources and addresses feasting as an important social practice in pre-Hispanic Honduras.

12.50–13.15

Lilo Ruther, Department of Religious Studies, University of Zurich (Switzerland)

## **Materializing the Absent in Death Rituals Outside of Religious Communities**

In this paper, I will ask how the Absent, i.e., the deceased person, is materialized in funerary practices outside of religious communities: Is the deceased person materialized at all and, if so, in which ways? Which role plays the coffin or urn as an engagement with and an articulation of materiality? What kind of other objects of materiality occur in these funerary practices? My answers to these questions will be based on data from unaffiliated death rituals in German-speaking Switzerland. They comprise interviews with celebrants as well as participant observations of concrete death rituals. The physical as well as the social context of the observed rituals will be referred to. As will be shown, ephemeral and transitory variable objects of nature have an important significance in the ritualization process.

14.50–15.15

Emma Pomeroy, Department of Archaeology, University of Cambridge (United Kingdom)

**The Challenges of Interpreting Mortuary/Funerary Behaviour in the Palaeolithic: Insights from Shanidar Cave (Iraqi Kurdistan)**

Debate over the evolutionary origins of mortuary and funerary behaviour (treatment of the dead, either lacking or including symbolism respectively) is ongoing, partly due to methodological and theoretical challenges. Part of the problem with interpreting funerary behaviour among Neanderthals, our close evolutionary relatives, is that many remains were excavated decades ago, without the benefit of modern archaeological methods and theory. The Shanidar Cave Neanderthals, discovered by Ralph Solecki between 1951 and 1960, have played a central role in debates over the origins of funerary practices. Solecki argued for various rituals including an intentional burial with flowers, and funerary feasting, but his interpretations remain controversial. The current Shanidar Cave Project recently uncovered new Neanderthal skeletal remains ('Shanidar Z') directly adjacent to the 'flower burial', offering a rare opportunity to investigate Neanderthal funerary behaviour with cutting-edge approaches. Preliminary results suggest intentional action in depositing the body, the presence of plant remains, possible 'grave' markers, and clustering of remains within the cave, raising intriguing questions about the meaning of death and possible 'special' places in the Neanderthal world. But how far can we legitimately take these interpretations? Can we confidently infer symbolism? And what are the implications for understanding the evolution of funerary behaviour and cognition?

15.15–15.40

Sarah Tarlow, Centre for Historical Archaeology, University of Leicester (United Kingdom)

**Belief and Bodies in Early Modernity**

Beliefs are complicated things. Belief is not the same as religious faith, although religious faith can be one kind of belief. We draw upon bodies of belief in a contextual way, so that sometimes our religious beliefs are primary, and at other times, scientific, cultural, folkloric or other ways of believing might be more important. This is particularly evident in the apparently contradictory and incompatible kinds of belief that surrounded the dead body in early modernity. This paper addresses the materiality of the corpse and early modern beliefs about it: what did the dead body mean? Could it be understood as having sentience and even agency? We need to look at archaeological, historical, folkloric and cultural sources of evidence in parallel to begin to address these questions.

15.40–16.05

Jens Schlieter, Institute for the Science of Religion, University of Bern (Switzerland)

**Absence**

I will present the hypothesis that abstract signs for departed (dead) could be the earliest semiotic affordance of religion. A semiotic affordance of religion takes place if a certain sign affords a religious understanding or religious use. More specifically, I argue that the capacity of the human mind to understand and use signs with arbitrary relations between signifier and signified emerged with abstract signs that signify an irreversibly "absent," as is the case with deceased members of a group. Abstract signs enabled humans to refer to a dead human, a permanent "absentee." Such signs allow to externalize complex emotions. These abstract signs, and the respective emotions, became on their part the basis for further religious perceptions. Thus, abstract signs—e.g., large stones—were probably the earliest means to mark an invisible side of a bipolar distinction, signifying the "supernatural," "superhuman," or "transcendent."

16.30–16.55

Fredrik Ekengren, Department of Archaeology and Ancient History, Lund University (Sweden)

**Probing the Multimodality of Graves: Scenes, Spectators and Visual Engagement**

Seeing is a principal medium of social life. In collaboration with gesture, movement, touch, sound, and facial expression, it forms the sensory basis of human communication. In mortuary archaeology, the importance of visual communication is often assumed. The dead body, the rituals performed, and the objects included in the grave are interpreted as symbolically important, imbued with social and religious meaning through their treatment and display at the funeral. The theoretical and methodological implications of this presumed sensory experience is, however, still largely unexplored. How do we approach visual literacy of the ritual participants and spectators; not literacy understood as a defined and shared grammar, but the ability to perceive and interpret the scenes enacted at the funeral? How do we approach the visual and sensory engagement with the graves and their materiality? The present talk will tackle this challenge and suggest approaches for studying visual communication, multimodality and meaning making in mortuary practices.

16.55–17.20

Daniel Robins, Department of Sociology, University of York (United Kingdom)

**The Material Agency of the Dead Body**

This talk will question the extent to which the materials of the dead body contain a form of agency. Through ethnographic fieldwork conducted at three English crematoria and document-based methods, I have found that the materials of the corpse contain a form of material agency (Knappett & Malafouris, 2008). Namely, this occurs through the reactivity that the materials of the dead body show when they come into contact with other materials, people, and technologies inside of crematoria. A particular focus is placed on human fat, which exists as neither a solid, nor a liquid, but instead as an ambiguous material form (Douglas, 2002). When these fats react to temperatures, oxygen, and the human touch, their materiality and subsequent meanings transform, allowing them to communicate risk to members of the crematorium team. Through reaction, dead human fat materials do contain a form of agency, which prompts questions concerning the limits of agency in the material world.

17.20–17.45

Michaela Wisler, Institute for the Science of Religion, University of Bern (Switzerland)

**Human Remains as Religious Objects? A Point of View from Science of Religion**

The consideration of materiality and human remains in Science of Religion is still very young and in development. Therefore, this presentation tries to fill in a gap and asks the question: can human remains be seen as religious objects? And how does Science of Religion engage with the topic of human remains as religious objects? The presentation will be divided into two parts; first there will be some theoretical thoughts about the idea of human remains as religious objects. Secondly, these considerations will be illustrated with some examples from European and Central Asian contemporary societies. These two examples from completely different regions and backgrounds should help to explain the potential of a viewpoint from Science of Religion about human remains.

9.35–10.00

Jessica Ryan-Despraz, Laboratory of prehistoric archaeology and anthropology, University of Geneva (Switzerland)

**Ideology and Function: An Anthropological Approach to Assessing the Links between Warfare and Social Status During the Bell Beaker Period**

The end of the Neolithic period witnessed the rise and spread of the Bell Beaker culture across a vast geographic landscape throughout Europe and North Africa during the third millennium BCE. This period's material culture has provided insight into the cultural and economic innovations as the Neolithic period began its transition into the Bronze Age. Specifically, burials containing novel items linked to archery, such as stone wristguards, and bow-shaped pendants, but also the continued placement of arrowheads, has allowed researchers to address questions concerning specialization, occupation, and archery function. Up until now, these archery-related burials have led archaeologists to presume a direct association between object and individual occupation, thereby classifying these people as "archers". However, this research aimed to test this assumption by applying an anthropological methodology to the osteological remains in the goal of determining potential specialized archer activity. These analyses found no correlation between the grave goods and a possible archer occupation, implying a layer of symbolism within these "archer" burials. The question therefore arises that if these burials did not necessarily contain specialized archers, why did they have archery-related items? Analyses of the stone wristguards have found that while they often had a long life, they likely did not function as practical pieces of archery equipment. Similar patterns are visible for arrowheads, many of which show no signs of having been a projectile. What could therefore have been the possible symbolic function of such grave goods? A secondary anthropological result found that there was a correlation between an individual's muscular development, which is largely linked to manual labor, and his or her funerary context. This provides evidence for a labor and class distribution illustrated through an archery-related burial ritual. An in-depth archaeological survey found numerous indications for warfare during the Neolithic period and minimal evidence for hunting. These archer burial traditions therefore exhibit a potential link between warfare and archery, either as a practice or as an ideal, and an elevated social position, thus making them a likely reflection of Bell Beaker personal and societal values.

10.00–10.25

Matthieu Honegger, Institute for Archaeology, University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland)

**Social Relations and Inequalities Through Funerary Rites: The Example of the Royal Necropolis of Kerma**

The investigations of the Swiss archaeological mission in Sudan over the past 15 years have focused on the early stages of the main cemetery of the Kerma Kingdom (2500–1500 BC). Between early and recent excavations, more than 700 burials have been documented and allow to follow the process of hierarchisation of the society during 500 years, from the small apparently egalitarian tombs of the initial phase to the emergence of the first royal graves around 2000 BC. Our aim is to identify the main parameters that reflect the socio-economic transformations leading to the constitution of an elite.

10.25–10.50

Melanie Augstein, Lehrstuhl für Ur- und Frühgeschichte, Universität Leipzig (Germany)

**The Manipulation of Grave Goods as Means of Transformation or Enchainment**

Objects from graves are usually interpreted as grave goods related to the deceased, indicating their social status or having biographical relevance. The handling of the objects, though, is rarely addressed, even if it has left visible traces. Often these are mechanical or destructive manipulations such as breaking or folding, but also more subtle phenomena such as rendering useless by removing elements relevant to functionality, pars pro toto and deliberate incompleteness, the splitting of objects into several graves, or inversion. These are to be understood as social practices of attributing meaning in the context of symbolic and ritual communication integral to the funerary ritual. In my presentation, using selected examples from the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, such practices are discussed as means of transformation or of enchainment.

11.35–12.00

Marco Milella, Institute of Forensic Medicine, University of Bern (Switzerland), Gino Caspari, Institute of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bern (Switzerland)

**The Kokel of Southern Siberia – Interdisciplinary Insights into Funerary Rituals of a Pastoralist Steppe Community**

From the end of the Xiongnu Empire to the establishment of the first Turkic Khaganate, the territory of Southern Siberia sees the emergence of distinctive local material cultures. The Kokel culture is essentially unknown in the international English-language literature even though archaeological sites pertaining to this material culture are among the most common in Tuva (Southern Siberia). This makes them important for the understanding aspects of the sociocultural dynamics following the collapse of the first "steppe empire". We present the results of an interdisciplinary study of a Kokel funerary site recently excavated near the Early Iron Age kurgan Tunnug 1 and discuss the data in the context of the available Soviet and Russian literature. The Kokel culture substantially differs from the material culture of the Xiongnu and has to be seen as a largely independent cultural entity of small tribal groups without a pronounced social hierarchy engaging in frequent violent local conflict.

12.00–12.25

Noah Steuri, Institute of Archaeological Sciences, University of Bern (Switzerland)

**Examining the Multiplicity of Burial Practice within Neolithic Stone Cist Graves in the Western Alpine Region**

The first cemeteries of the western alpine region are detectable around 4800 BC. These consist of cist graves made of stone (or in some cases wood) slabs and become relatively widespread during the following millennium. Over this greater geographical area and long time period (until ca. 3800 BC) these graves remain relatively uniform. However, a wide range of burial practices and funerary rituals can be observed in the context of Neolithic stone cist graves; single- and collective graves with multiple usage phases occur simultaneously and side by side, as do primary and secondary inhumations with cremations and manipulations of human remains. I will present different examples from selected sites in Switzerland, France and Italy analyzed in the context of my PhD project. The aim is to highlight the evolution and multiplicity of burial practices within stone cist graves using anthropological- and new radiocarbon data.

12.25–12.50

Sarah Perez, Bastiaan van Rijn, Institute for the Science of Religion, University of Bern (Switzerland)

**Confronting Death: Inspiring Innovation Through Interdisciplinary Dialogues**

From the funerary rituals of the Neanderthals, to present-day cremation and from the analysis and interpretation of ancient grave goods to interviews with bereaved: it is clear that the present workshop is multidisciplinary in the sense of topics, methods and theories. In this paper, an attempt is made towards interdisciplinarity. For this, shared terminology and research questions are of paramount importance. Basing ourselves on the widely differing topics of the other speakers, some methods, theories and research interests will be highlighted as possible tools to bridge the gap between disciplines. The goal will not be to change the direction of existing research, but rather to facilitate the conversation between the various groups present, based on our shared interests in death, materiality, and culture.