

MIKE PARKER PEARSON.
THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF DEATH AND BURIAL.
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The investigation of funerary customs, of the social status, gender, grave goods and rituals of the deceased, is very important in archaeological research, as it enables us to understand the way people in prehistory thought, believed and understood their world. A lot of modern scientific data, that, as in the case of the Ötzi, says much about the health, clothing and armaments of the deceased, is often used in burial site research. However, not all burials attract such attention. Moreover, usually only fragmentary sources of information are found, which are not suitable for wider generalisations. Thus, the straightforward comparison of various pieces of scientific data about even contemporary cemeteries can permit only an imagined reconstruction of the conception of the afterlife.

Mike Parker Pearson's book *The Archaeology of Death and Burial*, in which the author presents a wide spectrum of research issues associated with cemeteries that archaeologists investigate, as well as with the archaeological and bioanthropological material found within them, is not like this. This research data is analysed in its social, cultural anthropological and cultural ecological contexts.

The book consists of nine chapters and appendices. Each chapter analyses different research issues which relate to the author's main research question: prehistoric man's conception of the afterlife.

At the beginning of the work, Parker Pearson presents the account of a Viking funeral that Ibn Fadlan left in the report of his journey known as *Risala*. Starting from this description, an ethnoarchaeological leitmotif remains throughout the entire work. When analysing any kind of question associated with the deceased's social status, kinship, gender, choice of cemetery location, and so on, the author presents lots of comparative ethnological material from various continents. This comparative ethnological material is examined in parallel with social anthropological questions associated with death. Very interesting data associated with the course of funerary rites, the breaking off of relations between the dead and the living, and the influence of ancestors and spirits during the funeral, is presented. The author does not avoid discussing L. Binford's ideas about the variability of funerary customs, or the hypotheses presented by A. Saxe dealing with the social

dimensions of funerals. The author's thoughts regarding Saxe's proposition in which he speaks of reasons for the appearance of cemeteries are interesting. Parker Pearson explains that cemeteries indicate the appearance of a functional relationship with a locality (the land), but functional relationships with the ancestors through burial places go significantly further.

One important theme in the book is cannibalism and the intentional mixing of the bones of the dead. After a discussion about anthropological and archaeological data to demonstrate instances of cannibalism, the author shows how there are methodological (in the case of coprolite analysis) and ideological problems in proving such a phenomenon.

The position in which the deceased was buried (curled up, in the foetal position, laid on the side, and so on) is, in the author's opinion, a social expression. Presenting ethnographic examples from Madagascar, the author discusses how the corpse is buried with the head to the west, but while alive the person had slept in the opposite direction, with the head to the east. Here, according to the author, death is like the antithesis of life.

The issue of the preservation of the body, mummification, is one significant theme in the chapter devoted to reading the body. Another of this chapter's topics is body tattoos, which might, for example, depict chaotic scenes formed by carnivores and herbivores as though they were reflecting the very instance of the passage from this world to the next.

Regarding the bog bodies found in northwest Europe, Parker Pearson raises the question: were these bodies sacrifices, or an expression of the social rejection of the community? Were they offerings, or the results of executions? The crippled nature or physical disability of many of them could have been considered as "being touched by the gods". According to the author, they could have been abnormal or lame individuals separated from normal people.

A large part of Parker Pearson's work is devoted to a discussion of the research questions on the status, rank and political power of the deceased. For this, the author presents social evolutionary theories as well as the changes in funerary customs associated with the respective period's social organisation. One of the main questions the author raises in analysing these problems

is whether the grave goods placed inside the burial with the deceased were the possessions of the deceased or of the mourners, or perhaps even heirlooms. The solution to this question would, according to the author, enable a determination of the deceased's social status, as well as the level of authority he held.

The author devotes a chapter of the book to the study of gender and kinship by burial materials. The point of departure for this research is archaeological material from Denmark and England. The author examines the change in settlement and (male and female) cemetery locations, the peculiarities of group burials, kinship and its correlations in respective cemeteries.

The author refers to various branches and specialists in archaeological science in his investigation of death and prehistoric mortuary problems. Among them are scholars of ethnoarchaeology, processual archaeology and New Archaeology.

In preparing the book, the author uses mostly archaeological research data from Central and Western Europe. In certain instances, when he examines gender and kinship questions, the orientation of the deceased's burial, and cemetery structure, he could have made use of eastern Baltic archaeological material, as it is currently accessible to researchers worldwide.

The issues examined in the book are important and up-to-date; the data that is used from various scientific fields confers a depth and a comprehensiveness to the questions investigated. Parker Pearson's work will be important to all who deal with questions regarding the spiritual culture of people in prehistory.

Dr Habil. Algirdas Girininkas
 Institute of Baltic Sea Region History and Archaeology,
 Klaipėda University, Tilžės g. 13
 LT-91251 Klaipėda
 LITHUANIA
 algisg@post.skynet.lt