Burial Terminology

A GUIDE FOR RESEARCHERS

RODERICK SPRAGUE
To Linda for keeping me from being another example
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Introduction

Science, it appears has come to a historical crossroads. On the one hand, it would seem to have completed the Tower of Babel, its knowledge now reaching far beyond the heavens and, through the global spread of English, recovering the ancient dream of a single language for the wisdom of the nations. Yet, from another vantage, the very opposite is suggested: this great tower of unanimity broken and rebuilt into a thousand walls by the power of jargon, dividing the disciplines by the arcanny of specialist speech.

—Montgomery (2004:1333)

Some years ago, Alexander Haüsler (1968:65) called for a comparative analysis of burial customs in northern Eurasia and North America in order “to develop methods which will permit us to explain the observations which we make [of a complex] in terms of causative variables operative in the past” (Binford 1971:25). A basic requirement for a discussion of such a cultural complex is 1) a meaningful and applicable classificatory system and 2) a precise nomenclature. Anyone who has attempted the analysis of burial traits in either geographical area—Eurasia or North America—is immediately aware that neither criterion has been met in the past or since Haüsler’s plea. Added to the task are the obvious differences that have developed in terminology among the several areas in the English language alone; the problem, when expanded to the Germanic languages, has been discussed by Ohlson (1968:255). The terminology of Australia, New Zealand, and English-speaking India has been included here, if known, but are the least researched areas. Hawai’i has generally used the typical North American terminology (Buck 1957).

The objective here is to define and outline that broad cultural complex commonly known as disposal of the dead and to further define the various terms used in describing the archaeological manifestations of the complex. As Ucko (1969:271) has said, “It is quite clear that the more the archaeologist manages to refine his [or her] definitions and terminology for describing such factors as body contraction [flexure] the more likely he [or she] is to recognize what may have been socially significant differences in funerary practice.” The scheme presented here is equally applicable to
Disposal of the dead is defined as a cultural process or series of processes by which a group abandons the physical remains of one of its deceased members to the elements and/or preserves part of the remains. Crooke (1899:271) expresses it in this manner: “The various modes of disposal of the dead ... may be divided into two classes—those in which the object is to preserve the body, or certain relics of it; and, secondly, those in which the ruling intention is to put the dead out of sight.” In a translation by Tom Harrisson (1962:2—3), Stöhr (1959:6) lists “two fundamental attitudes towards the corpse, which may be summarized thus: ‘severing of all relations with the corpse’... [and] preservation of the corpse until a ceremony is performed when the living communicate with the dead.” Kinnes (1975:17) suggests that skeletal material can be disposed of or preserved and/or utilized involving permanent or temporary storage.

In some older sources, the term “burial rites” is used for what is termed here “disposal of the dead.” Since actual burial is often not involved in disposing of a body, the term has not been used in this work. Presently there is a tendency for the more theoretically inclined researchers to substitute the term “mortuary practices” for “disposal of the dead.” Some see the term as more “delicate” or “scientific.” The term is “more inclusive” and thus has been used as synonymous with the complete process of burial of the dead from the preparation for dying to the final mourning practices years later. The term funerary archaeology (Williams 2003:4) not only is more restrictive, being limited to archaeology, but also has some of the same problems as mortuary practice.

Shepherd (1999:10) has expressed it thus: “It is clear that burial and funerary behavior are not the same thing. Events, actions, and meanings relating to the former are only part of all the events, actions, and meanings of the funeral. Much of the funerary ritual in any given instance may occur before or after the act of burial.” On the other hand, she sees burial and mortuary as “interchangeable” (Shepherd 1999:19n2), a position that ignores all the forms of disposal not involving burial.

A recent article by Daniel Jordan Smith (2004) is an extreme example of “burial” being used for “funerary ritual.” The title is “Burials and Belonging in Nigeria: Rural-Urban Relations and Social Inequity in a Contemporary African Ritual,” yet the article contains absolutely nothing explaining how the physical process of burial takes place, such as the grave excavation; the position, deposition, or orientation of the body; or the setting of the complete cemetery.

Disposal of the dead has had a long and widespread use. An early published bibliography of sources found in the Cremation Association of America (1918) library lists ten sources between 1859 and 1902 utilizing the phrase “disposal of the dead.” David M. Gradwohl (2004, pers. comm.) suggested the term “disposition of the dead,” which sounds less harsh and provides for those religions keeping the dead close to the living in any way—psychologically, spiritually, physically—but experience has shown that new terminology, unless truly needed, is not accepted. The extended meaning of
“mortuary practice” and the restricted meaning of “burial rite” suggest that “disposal of the dead” is more accurate and is thus strongly recommended and will be used throughout this work.

If correctly interpreted here, Grinsell (1953:xvii) would define “funeral customs” as equivalent to disposal of the dead. Fortuitous interments, “adventitious remains” (Collins 1975:170), or remains resulting from accidental death without benefit of additional human agencies are not considered; thus, a distinction is made between “bone material” as used by Brothwell (1972:1) and intentional disposal or “the physical remains of mortuary procedures” (Tainter 1975:1). The same distinction is made by Belfer-Cohen and Hovers (1992:468) between “natural inhumation” and “intentional inhumation.” This use of the term inhumation for natural burial will not be used in this work in spite of the existence of some accident in the archaeological record. Examples might include landslide, rockfall, earthquake, volcanic ash, pumice, lava, water deposit, flood, tide, and collapse of structures.

In the past, the “new archaeologists” required concise terminology and adequate description in order to “construct a body of theory designed to bring ... mortuary practices and their sociocultural determinants ... into the determined world of science” (Saxe 1970:i). It is interesting to note that Saxe utilized ethnographic rather than archaeological descriptions to test his several hypotheses, a fact noted earlier by Peebles (1972:3). Bartel’s (1982:50) concern is that “an analysis of discrete elements such as corpse disposal, out of social context, and without regard to possible relationships between disposal and other social variables, reduces the anthropological perspective to piecemeal reconstruction.” The converse, however, is also true: all the social context in the world will not make poorly or inaccurately collected data meaningful or useful.

In an article concerned with deriving cultural data from burials, Willem J. H. Willems (1978:88) says,

The methodology [of cultural analysis] is basically simple, although sometimes highly complex and sophisticated tools have to be employed. What needs to be done first is a complete inventarisation [inventory] of the total burial program of a particular society as it is preserved in the archaeological record. This means that all possibly significant variables, such as age, sex, treatment, position and orientation of the grave, etc., should be recorded.

His final statement (Willems 1978:94) is also significant, in which he says that “the potential information contained in human burials is far greater than is usually extracted from them.”

The call for the accurate description of cultural burial traits has had a new and parallel effort among the physical or biological anthropologists in a volume edited by Jane Buikstra and Douglas Ubelaker (1994) titled Standards for Data Collection from Human Skeletal Remains. This excellent work is in response to legislation around the
world calling for the repatriation of skeletal material rightfully belonging to various politically dominated groups. A series of forms for recording these biological data, known as Standardized Osteological Database (SOD), is available online at www.cast.uark.edu/cast/sod. While the original draft of this work was written long before the conception of the Standards volume, deference will be given to that work in matters pertaining to osteobiology, especially the category of demography, except where the archaeologist is better equipped to make and record the observation.

The comments made in the introduction to the work edited by Buikstra and Ubelaker (1994:2) concerning the recording of data by “undertrained students or marginal scholars” is also of real concern to archaeologists and social anthropologists attempting to understand the results of past excavations of burial grounds and cemeteries. One difference is that we do not have the luxury of another analysis in the laboratory before repatriation takes place. The data have already been destroyed because the question of “who is qualified” was not an issue then. As one physical anthropologist expressed it in 1962, “anyone can do archaeology” —and so they did.

We are long overdue for a statement of standards for the excavation and recording of burials. Niquette and Ross-Stallings (1995:19—21) provide an excellent beginning to such a statement. The section is titled “Guidelines for the Archeological Excavation of Historic Cemeteries,” but their guidelines are easily applied to all burials, not just historic. Any text designed for the description of modern or contemporary cemetery relocation must include adequate terminology just as much as such terminology is required for ethnographic or prehistoric archaeological studies.

This study has attempted to obtain terms and examples from historical archaeology, prehistory, ethnography, and forensic anthropology. This work does not claim to have completely combed the literature but is fairly complete in North America, western Europe, Australasia, and Asian sources in English. It is less thorough in Latin America, eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. The area of biblical archaeology is the least searched subject area, followed by classical, except for more recently published work in Greece and Italy. The obvious use of European languages, in descending frequency of utilization, is English, German, Scandinavian as a group, Italian, and Spanish with virtually no French. It should also be noted that many more sources were inspected and not used than were used. The forensic sources, especially, were found to yield little in the way of new terminology, but what they did add was very useful and worthy of the search.

The methodology of burial excavation, other than record keeping through consistent terminology, is not one of the objectives pursued here. Theory, in terms of both its history and more contemporary discussions, also is not part of the objective of this work. Again, however, as far as consistent terminology and communication are vital to any discussion, theory must be of concern. Bartel (1982) provides an excellent historical review of the analysis of “mortuary practices,” both ethnographic and archaeological. While analysis is dependent on precise and consistent terminology, again these methods of analysis are beyond the scope of this work.

Other than the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA), cultural resource laws and regulations are not a major concern of this
work. For an excellent and up-to-date summary of this area within the United States, see the second edition of the work by King (2004).

Many of the systems begun in the 1970s are strongly centered on “social status” indicators or what are arbitrarily chosen as potential indicators. An excellent review of “mortuary theory” from 1970—the date of Saxe’s dissertation—to the turn of the century is contained in Shepherd (1999:7—20). Her chapter is brief and concise. McHugh (1999) covered the same ground as Shepherd but in vastly more detail. During this period, it appears that the accurate description of burials was sacrificed for “science.” For a historical perspective and an example of those who, in the 1970s, had the new and “correct” analysis of burial practices and how they related to social structure, the work of Peter J. Ucko (1969) is also strongly recommended. The works by Shepherd (1999) and McHugh (1999) are both in the BAR (British Archaeological Reports) series, which, unfortunately, is not widely distributed in U.S. libraries. The bibliography in McHugh (1999:145-156) is especially useful for those concerned with the application of burial theory. See Carr (1994:7-18) for a succinct review from North America of these prehistoric systems of analysis and their fallibility. Several of the papers in Rahtz, Dickinson, and Watts (1980) should also be reviewed for opinions on the Saxe theory.

The author’s complete excavation of a large (260 graves) historic site with a highly varied wealth of grave goods utilized by a people known ethnographically to have a uniformly egalitarian social system has created considerable doubt concerning the reliability of this body of theory as pertaining to the historic period. In spite of the known social system, there were occasional child burials in the site that were noticeably richer in grave goods.

In no way is it suggested that an anthropologically valid system should not be derived from this system. As questioned by Deward Walker (2004, pers. comm.), “To what extent should this system of classification, based as it is on the objective, measurable, and observable traits of burials, be ultimately accompanied by a similar system of classification for the social events involved in burials viewed cross-culturally?” The Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) and other logical ethnographic sources have not been mined for the ethnographic data pertaining to burial terminology.

The terms listed, both the recommended and the negatively noted ones, are largely etic, with the emic left to ethnographers and ethnohistorians. The objective, with no apology, is to standardize the terms used in the Western scientific world (etic) when describing the physical aspect of burial and other forms of body disposal. The emic forms, which include those terms used by the people doing the burying, especially the nonmaterial aspects of the process, must be recorded when known. For the prehistorian and often the historical archaeologist, this is beyond recovery. Ideally, the two views should be combined and contrasted whenever possible.

One problem with burial terminology is the need, as noted previously, for a generic term. Burial, as we have seen, is not close to being an all-inclusive term. “Mortuary terminology,” on the other hand, encompasses too much, as we are not concerned with the process of the funeral program and associated ritual. “Disposal of the dead” has its
detractors as excluding those practices that involve continued concern with the dead, such as leaving additional objects at the site of the burial or the keeping of relics. Some disposal is not disposal at all but rather the veneration of the dead, often with a Western misunderstanding of how the dead are viewed.

As one working with American Indians (their preferred term in my region) since 1958, I have become acutely aware of how different societies view their dead in very different ways. The dominant population will never understand the damage done by the failure of NAGPRA to reverse the 500 years of burial desecration in North America. The contact of the living with the dead is very real and is based on a very different view of any afterlife.

So-called ancestor worship is probably as active among the overseas Chinese as it is in much of China today, and in no way does the term “disposal of the dead” cover this example because the dead are always present and revered. For an accurate discussion of the place of the ancestors in Chinese culture today, see Chung and Wegars (2005). There is a tendency in the meaning of Chinese terms for many of the objects used in burials and funerals to imply life as pointed out by Cohen (1995) in response to an article by Sprague (1995:6):

In China the character shòu ‘longevity’ is often used euphemistically in matters relating to death and burial. The character shòu is commonly used in funerary décor—I have seen it on coffins. It is also used to denote some funerary objects, e.g., a coffin maker’s shop will often have a sign board identifying it as a supplier of shòu-qi ‘longevity’ implements, i.e. coffins. A person’s age at death is often stated as “having n years of longevity.” A tomb can be called shòu-chéng ‘longevity citadel’ or shòu-xué ‘longevity cave.’ The boards for making coffins are called shòu-mù ‘longevity wood’ or shòu-bàn ‘longevity boards.’ Grave clothes are called shòu-yī ‘longevity clothes.’ The birthday of a dead person is called ming-shòu ‘longevity in the darkness’ (of the netherworld). This is only a sample of the relevant terminology. [Chinese characters can be found in the original]

See Purnell (1993) for a more detailed discussion of Chinese as well as Japanese, Hawaiian, Samoan, and Tongan burials in Hawai‘i. In addition, the Mexican American cemeteries, especially of California and Texas, have a rich literature showing the strong sense of continuing relationship of the living with the dead (Barber 1993).

In a similar way to the Chinese, Gradwohl (1993:368) has also pointed out that the terms for Jewish cemeteries include reverse meaning, such as Beth Ha Haim (House of Life) and Beth Olam (House of Eternity). Observances among the Jewish populations worldwide indicate a continuing reverence for the dead and frequent return to the graveyards.

Any discussion of the definitions or organization of burial terminology that mentions any work in a negative light should not be taken either personally or as a
negative criticism of the total work but represents only the first or a single example found of that particular usage. For this reason only, many of the examples cited tend to be earlier than the 1980s. Some works that are found to be excellent and real contributions to the literature may be quoted in several places with aberrant terminology. A recent example of excellent work with a very difficult sample but utilizing divergent terminology is Rita Fisher-Carroll’s (2001) study of the Upper Nodena site Arkansas.

The final problem in constructing a uniform terminology for describing burial or disposal of the dead was succinctly stated by one of the reviewers of this book who described it as the “perverse competition of archaeologists unwilling to accept anyone else’s terminology.” If this were to be my preferred terminology, it would be a very different set of words. All of us must make sacrifices of our cherished terms if we are to achieve any sense of uniformity and agreement.

The first of two major changes that will be difficult for some to accept is the consistent replacement of prone and supine with front and back. Reviewers were mixed on this point, but some even said they had used the former terms but would change for the latter simply for better understanding, especially among the nonprofessionals.

The other suggested change, made as early as 1968, gained some hostile comments that made it clear that the North American terms were not acceptable to some in Great Britain. The situation is very clear that in Great Britain the terms for leg flexure, such as extended, flexed/crouched, and crouched/contracted, are not consistent, and even prominent authors have given exact opposite definitions to the same terms. On the other hand, there is very little confusion in the North American and Australian literature (Littleton 1998:10) in the use of the terms extended, semi-flexed, and flexed. Figure 1 shows clearly the relationship of the terms and how little change is necessary. It is recommended in Great Britain that the North American terms at least be listed in parentheses to facilitate worldwide communication.
The contributions of this work to burial terminology are only four but perhaps are significant. The first is concerned with the exposure of the false dichotomy of inhumation and cremation. They are not mutually exclusive processes (Sprague 1968a). Second is the separation of deposition (how the body is deposited in the grave—on the side) and position (how the body parts are in relation to other body parts in the grave—flexed). Third is the suggestion that the three major positions be labeled extended, semi-flexed, and flexed—a well-justified suggestion but one that thus far appears not to be popular in Great Britain. The fourth and final suggestion from Ubelaker (1999) is the separation of the position of the thigh and torso (hip joint) from

**FIGURE 1**

Schematic representation of various flexure positions and varying terminology.
the position of the thigh and (lower) leg (knee joint). Recognition of these changes in burial description would go a long way toward making burial description more useful to future researchers.
Historical Background

The concern for concise terms for disposal variables has a long history in the English language. For example, Thomas Browne (1658), who wrote a book on an early English excavation titled *Hyriotaphia, Urne-buriall, or, A Discourse of the Sepulchrall Urnes Lately Found in Norfolk*, was concerned with such factors as cremation, inhumation, coffins, position, or deposition. These included very specific notations (Browne 1658 [1927:58]), such as the following:

That they buried their dead on their backs, or in a supine position, seems agreeable unto profound sleep, and common posture of dying; contrary to the most natural way of birth; Nor unlike our pendulous posture, in the doubtful state of the womb. Diogenes was singular, who preferred a prone situation in the grave, and found Christians like neither, who decline the figure of rest, and make choice of an erect posture.

Several specific schemes have been published in English for the study of disposal of the dead. The earliest so far found is William Tegg (1876:10), who listed “three great classifications: (1) The simple closing up of the body in earth or stone; (2) The burning of the body and the entombing of the cinders; and, (3) The embalming of the body.” A close second was Barber (1877:197), who suggested four methods of burial: “inhumation (subterrene), cremation (subterrene), embalmment (subterrene), and aerial [platform] sepulture (superterrene).”

A circular requesting information on American archaeology issued by the Smithsonian Institution (1878:10-11) mentioned several traits concerning “aboriginal burials” that should be recorded. These included the following:

Are the dead found in isolated graves, cemeteries, ossuaries, caves or mounds?
Are the graves which are in groups arranged according to any plan?
Are they on a level tract or on a slope?
If the latter, what point of compass does it face?
Were the bodies buried in a sitting posture, stretched out, lying on the side and doubled up, or are the bones mingled indiscriminately in the