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Medicine for Managers

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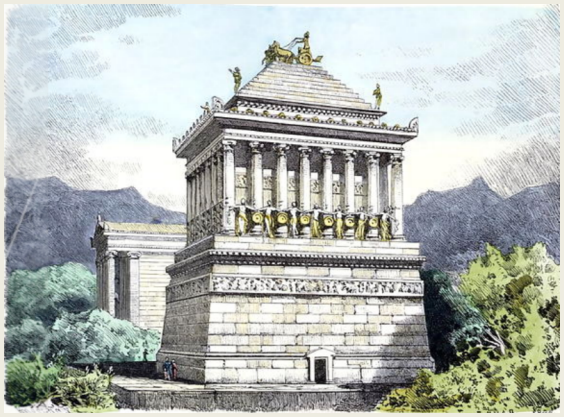
Death

In the ancient world, death was usually profoundly respected and the deceased were revered. It was reflected in many civilisations in the certain knowledge that death was not the end but the beginning of a transition to a new realm and so was accompanied by ceremonies and rites of passage to appease spirits and aid the transfer. Awareness and ritualisation of death was certainly part of human culture in Paleolithic times.

In many early societies, both the fear of death and the awe surrounding it resulted in the development of a death cult from which developed religious beliefs.

Even in the Stone Age, death, if not through killing, involved the passage of the spiritual soul to the afterlife and appropriate corporeal burial to facilitate the despatch.

The management of death reflected the individual's status in life but was also a warning to those who remained because the corpse was regarded as a source of harm and sickness and had to be 'removed' as quickly as possible to avoid 'catching' death.



This is seen in the various ways that cultures have managed the death by interment, or fire, exposure or abandonment of the corpse to its fate.

Countless myths regarding the events following death have been formulated to gratify the deity, favour the spirit of the deceased, or to indulge the plethora of beliefs exhibited by the various cultures.

Burial was most prevalent amongst ancient people and preceded cremation as a method of disposal. Burial involved inhumation alone or with others with recognition ranging from little or no evidence of location to interment with ceremony and anything from simple memorials to enormous mausoleums

Many saw the dead as 'sleeping' and there are many examples in civilisations across Europe, Asia and the Middle East where death was

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believed to precede survival. Neanderthal caves revealed such evidence and the Cromagnon civilisation of 10-50,000 years ago adopted a practice of burying in a flexed position, covered with animal bones and shells, necklaces and tools in preparation for the next life.

Cremation developed later and, interestingly, there is significant evidence that other civilisations indulged in ***cannibalism*** or ***anthropophagy*** which has survived in some degree in some current primitive societies, generally in pursuit of one of the deceased's strength or soul, or magic, revenge, religious fervour or honour.

The Egyptians used ***mummification*** and interment of the wealthy and regal in ***tombs*** and others in ***mastabas***.



They were elaborately decorated and represented a staircase to heaven to join Osiris, the god of death.

In other cultures with similarly decorated tombs above or below ground, the deceased was interred with valuables, tools, food and garments.

Death rituals involving the ancestors of the dead were vital to placate the spirits by continuing to provide for them in their afterlife.

The Etruscans in Italy around 500BC built house-like tombs on the outskirts of settlements where suitably bathed, embalmed and mummified bodies were placed in sarcophagi in the belief that the dead lived in such houses. The British Druids, however, believed in ***metempsychosis***, which was the belief in the supposed transmigration at death of the soul of a human being or animal into a new body of the same or a different species.

The Huns, about 300BC, buried bodies with valuables but their graves were unmarked.
In Bronze Age Scandinavia about 500BC bodies were set in graves marked by boulders in the shape of a boat to carry the deceased soul to Valhalla, the God Odin's palace.

By 700-800AD, such graves were replaced by actual ships for the wealthy and warriors, although ordinary people were simply buried or cremated.

In the Middle and Far East, cremation was not the custom until Buddhists introduced it. It was also introduced in Vedic and Brahmanical India. Currently there are Indian crematory rituals.

The burning is accompanied by purification bathing in a river or lake and reading of sacred texts.

Exposure was practised in the ancient world by few cultures. A few early civilisations simply abandoned bodies in 'death sites' to be devoured by dogs or birds of prey. Scythians in Central Asia suspended bodies in trees for birds to consume, with the bones subsequently collected and buried.

Tibetans abandoned bodies to the vultures and the Parsis of ancient Persia followed a similar ritual. Since ancient times other civilisations in Australia, Ceylon, Siberia, Oceania and Africa have utilised various methods of exposure with

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religious ceremonies of various types including disposal of the deceased by being left on beds of vegetation in forests, in designated areas near villages for preying dogs or wild beasts, or by immersion in the sea.

In ***Pre-Christian Britain***, burial, cremation, body exposure, cannibalism and sacrifice all occurred. Most adults died young, usually below the age of 35, as a result of disease, famine, or violence and many women died in childbirth. Gough's Cave in Cheddar Gorge contains 15,000 year-old human bones which show evidence of de-fleshing and eating. Brain cases have been prepared as drinking cups or containers.

Caves throughout the land were used for burial but during the neolithic period (c3-10,000 years ago) communal burial in large monuments such as long barrows or stone mounds was common, often after the flesh had been removed by exposure to the elements or animals.

During the Bronze Age (2300-800 BC) individual burials occurred in circular mounds called round barrows, normally with the body in the crouched position, although some were cremated. Grave belongings such as weapons (men) or jewellery (women) were included for use in the afterlife.

In the Iron Age (800BC to 45AD) there is little evidence of burial suggesting excarnation was the primary method of disposal, although burial again became popular towards the end of the period, incorporating valuables in the grave with other items cast into rivers as offerings to the water gods. Writings by Roman commentators at the time suggested they had religious ceremonies associated with transmigration of the soul.

In Britain, after the death of Christ, until the fifth century, treatment of death was heavily influenced by the Romans, with cremations, ashes placed in urns and burials increasingly common.

In the Anglo-Saxon period, 5th – 11th centuries, bodies were often placed under mounds of earth and, for the import ant citizens, weapons and jewellery were common accessories.



The ***Sutton Hoo ship burial*** dates to the seventh century. Found in 1939, it was a ship, measuring 88 feet long, dragged from a nearby river and used as a funereal monument and burial chamber filled with riches including feasting bowls, silver, textiles, gold, jewels and an iconic helmet and mask.

Between the 11th and 15th century, the Church took control and burial in the churchyard became compulsory in the 10th century. Funerals became more elaborate for those of social status while commoners had simpler graves.

It all changed with the advent of the Black Death, resulting in burial in mass graves with collective mourning.

With the Protestant Reformation funerals became more austere, and black mourning wear was introduced during the Elizabethan period.

In the Victorian period, 19th century, mourning became a more elaborate ritual, influenced by Queen Victoria's mourning for Prince Albert.

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By the 1880s, graveyards were becoming overcrowded, leading to a revival of cremation, legalised in 1884.

During the twentieth century, death arrangements shifted away from Christian culture and, after the second world war, funerals became less religious and the celebration of life became more prominent.

More recently, cremation has become increasingly popular due to affordability and practicality and is now the choice for 75% of funerals in the UK. Other current developments include 'natural' burials and the use of biodegradable coffins.

There is even room for humour in death. Here is a selection of gravestones to recognise who had the last laugh!

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