
”Fat or other tissues of corpses”: Sensory engagements with the dead in Mesolithic Europe

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Abstract

As the session abstract states, evidence for the treatment of the dead reveals an ever more complex and varied set of mortuary practices taking place across Mesolithic Europe. These include inhumation, cremation, secondary burial, manual disarticulation and dismemberment and, potentially, cannibalism. Many of these practices involved the living engaging with the dead body in various states of decomposition or skeletonisation, such as preparing and posing the recently dead for burial or cremation, collecting fragments of burned bone from the ashes of a pyre, retrieving specific bones from a skeletonised burial, or cleaning tissue from the bones of an exposed body. Such practices clearly involved sensory and affective engagements with death and the dead body. What is more, ethnographic studies show that bones and other bodily substances could hold significance beyond the funerary context, being utilised for their affective, magical or powerful qualities. Examples include the potential agency of the dead to enhance hunting success through the use of amulets or charms made from human remains, or spiritual assistance obtained through the consultation of curated dead bodies or the application of their bodily substances to the bodies of hunters and their weapons. Through a series of case studies, this paper will explore the ways in which human remains and other bodily substances were engaged with in Mesolithic Europe to discuss Mesolithic sensory experiences of death and attitudes to the dead body.

Keywords: death, senses, experience, mortuary practices, funerary archaeology

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