News and views

Classification of Post-medieval Secondary Mortuary Practices and Disturbances

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines a general classification of secondary burial practices and intentional disturbances in post-medieval funerary objects and areas. The classification is based on knowledge of the living culture from the historic record, from which archaeological and taphonomical consequences are inferred. The intentionality of secondary impacts is categorised by object (*e.g.* buried individuals, grave goods, funeral object as a complex), mechanism (*e.g.* exhumation, destruction, damage, additional deposition, removal) and the intentions of human agents (*e.g.* sanitation, re-burial, looting, acquiring prestige, reuse, dishonour).[1]

1. Introduction

Secondary mortuary practices fall largely into the interests of researchers focused on prehistory or the Early Middle Ages (*e.g.* Hanuliak 2006; Podborský 1988; Sládek, Kavánová 2003; Sosna 2007). A considerable body of evidence has been collected as a result of intensive fieldwork in these periods. The character of funerary objects and cemeteries in these periods (mostly with single and spatially discrete graves) allows us to detect secondary impacts more easily than on stratified cemeteries from historical periods. Yet the post-medieval period has attracted the attention of archaeologists who have found it necessary to deal with this type of archaeological record more seriously, in response to the intensive contemporary development that is disturbing known or closed post-medieval graveyards.

Currently, the study of burial contexts is conducted on a multidisciplinary level as exemplified by the approach promoted in bioarchaeology (*e.g.*, Larsen ed. 1990, ed. 2001). Interdisciplinary cooperation is grounded in the integration of theoretical frameworks, interpretation models, and fieldwork (*e.g.* case studies in Duday 2009; also Čech, Černý 1996; Průchová, Chroustovský 2009). Archaeologists are primarily focused on stratigraphy and artefacts (their formal and spatial aspects, cultural context), while biological anthropologists focus on buried individuals (a key element in burial practice), anatomy and demographics (*e.g.* Duday 2009). One area of joint interest is the identification and interpretation of transformative and taphonomic processes, and secondary anthropogenic impacts. The French school of terrain taphonomy, represented by H. Duday (Duday 2005, 2009; Duday *et al.* 1990) and others, offers a seminal application of forensic knowledge of soft tissue decay to archaeological fieldwork. While some general laws concerning soft tissue decay do exist, the process remains largely determined by context (Černý 1995; Duday 2005; Duday *et al.* 1990; Prokeš 2007; Roksandic 2002).

People in the past created places for the disposal of human remains. The natural setting chosen determined the site's survival to the present and affects the ability of archaeologists and anthropologists to recognise and understand its significance. *Human agency* can be recognised

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in three stages (Duday 2005, 164): pre-funeral treatment of the body, funeral deposition and closing of the grave and secondary post-funeral rites and intentional disturbance. This article focuses on the latter stage. The cultural context, chronological period, ethnic and religious identity of buried individuals and human agents, as well as the local social environment are all considered. In our country there have been different ethnic and religious minorities and Christians have practiced several different approaches to burial. Since the Middle Ages Christians were buried shortly after death, in places where decomposition processes affected human remains – the so called "primary burials" (Duday 2009, 14).

It is necessary to distinguish secondary impact agents (human or natural). Secondary impact is evidenced archaeologically by the visible edge of a newer excavation, different characters of fill, and distinctive intrusions. From a taphonomic point of view we can study the disturbance of anatomical position – dislocation of skeletal parts, disarticulation (joint disconnection and bone movement, Sorg a Haglund 2002, 15), the state of bone preservation, and modifications like bone fragmentation, the absence of some or all remains or the presence of redundant remains. Disturbed remains can be exhumed, damaged, destroyed or transported and deposited to other places or reburied (Duday 2005, 195; Duday 2009, 14). Cooperation between archaeologists and biological anthropologists is therefore necessary during fieldwork (*e.g.* Duday 2009, 3–14; Roksandic 2002).

In this paper, our aim is to outline a general classification of secondary burial practices and intentional disturbances, in relation to post-medieval funerary objects and areas (Table 1). We are not focusing on natural factors and processes influencing the archaeological record. Here, we try to deduce simple general motive categories, that arise from knowledge of the living culture (historical record) and then to model their archaeological and taphonomic consequences (Neustupný 2007, 165–167). The latter is supported by fieldwork experience of the second author. In this contribution we stay at a general level, and hope that future research will ascertain detailed correlates, or principles, that can relate behavioural phenomena to material and spatial phenomena (Schiffer 2002 [1976], 12–14).

Table 1. Classification of secondary mortuary practices and disturbances used in this paper.

Intentionality	Object	Activity	Aim, reason
1 intentional	1.1 individual	1.1.1 damage, destruction	A – hygienic, sanitary
			B – to prevent revenant's activities
		1.1.2 secondary burial (re-burial)	A – a new grave foundation
			B – re-burial
			C – wish of relatives
			D – expatriation from cemetery
		1.1.3 secondary purpose in the living culture	A – magical power
			B – prophylactic power
			C – healing power of a dead tissue
			D – prestige acquirement
			E – memento mori
			F – dissection material
			G – necrophilia
			H – other (fascination / fashion)
	1.2 grave goods	1.2.1 additional deposition	the wish of the dead's soul/spirit
		1.2.2 removal	A – magical power
			B – prestige acquirement
			C – re-burial
			D – looting
	1.3 funerary object	1.3.1 secondary deposition	–
		1.3.2 additional deposition of (relative) individual into older grave	–
		1.3.3 reconstruction / sanitation / abolishment of the cemetery	–
		1.3.4 vandalism / damage / dishonour	prestige acquirement; social, ethnic, and religious differences or controversy
		1.3.5 research fieldwork	–
2 unintentional	2.1 funerary object	2.1.1 intensive funerary activities	–
		2.1.2 building or reconstructing activities	–
		2.1.3 social events involving dances, etc.	–
		etc.	–

2. Intentionality of secondary activities in funeral objects and areas

Intentionality can be regarded as the direction of human consciousness toward a specific aim or goal (Chroustovský 2010, 5–12). This direction is not only mental, it also pertains to practical action and activity. For this discussion, we consider the basic aspect of intentionality to be the human agent, a person's motivations and goals, and the methods and means with which they realise their intended aims. In this chapter we present a structured list of possible motivations and goals that are supported by historical evidence. We divided intentional activities and disturbances by object (buried individuals, grave goods, grave as a whole/complex, funeral places and areas) and the requirements of the agents involved.

2.1 Intentional impacts directed at buried individuals and their remains

The cultural framework influences the ways in which deceased individuals are regarded and treated. The deceased's former social status and role, personal character, experience, skills, and the cause or circumstances of death, or character of their soul/spirit after death, can all affect their new role within the living community.

2.1.1 Requirement to damage or destroy buried remains

Let us start with the requirement to destroy corpses or skeletal remains. Common reasons include the *re-opening of the grave to clean it*, associated with burning the remains to eliminate odour or from fear of infection. Examples of this practice come from collective burials of soldiers killed on battlefields near Sedan (Ariès 2000, 300) and the reopening and cleaning of graves at the Cemetery of Innocents in Paris, (Ariès 2000, 241). Sometimes sanitation was conducted only on remains within disturbed graves which were then redeposited in a new grave with another person (*e.g.* Kostka, Šmolíková 1998, 829).

The burning of exhumed bodies is indicated by traces of charcoals and burned horizons. Cremated bones are also indicative of victims of fire, though burial on sacred sites was not always permitted as it was sometimes believed that death by fire indicated guilt. Grave sanitation is evidenced by layers or traces of lime (*e.g.* Flek, Kubálek, Omelka, Podliska 2009, 416–417).

Partial or complete destruction of the body was also carried out on *dangerous deceased individuals* (such as with revenants and vampires), particularly their souls or spirits, which were regarded as threats to the living. Such individuals were usually dangerous during their lifetimes. However, mothers that died in childbirth, newborns, or unchristened children were also targeted. Sometimes the total destruction of the remains was required (*e.g.* burning). This was not always the case and other treatments were carried out instead, such as the addition of artefacts and substances (Chorváthová 1993). Common partial treatments include the disruption of body integrity and functionality, such as

Figure 1. Decapitation is a usual treatment with the remains of dangerous people or revenants. Individual K40 from the churchyard at Poběžovice (district Domažlice; excavated by Museum of West Bohemia in Pilsen in 2010 under leadership of Martin Čechura). Photo by Erika Průchová.

decapitation or stabbing with a sharp stick, and damage to the head, lower part of the trunk or lower limbs (*e.g.* Hanuliak 2006, 148, 151; Horváthová 1993; Chorváthová 1993; Navrátilová 2004, 308–309; Navrátilová 2007; Zíbrt 1995 [1894], 14–15, 23–24).

Cut marks found on cervical vertebrae are indicative of decapitation before the decomposition of the soft tissues. The absence (Figure 1) or location of the skull is an indicator of post-mortem intervention. When a skull is found near its anatomic position and articulation is quite loose, we consider it a natural taphonomic dislocation into hollow space, rather than decapitation. Identification of stabbing with a sharp stick is difficult. If it occurs soon after the funeral possible indications would include fractures in thorax area, as a peri-mortal injury. Long after burial when there were only dry bones researchers tend to interpret fractured ribs as the result of natural post-depositional processes, such as soil pressure. The extent of disturbance of the lower part of the trunk or lower limbs varies, but includes disarticulation and dislocation of particular skeletal parts. Lower limbs can be displaced (right limb in the place of left limb and vice versa), or bones can be entirely mixed up. Bone dislocation can also be caused by decay of wooden structures (Duday 2009, 36–37). It is therefore necessary to consider the burial object from other points of view, such as its construction.

Figure 2. Example of pious and elaborate deposition of disturbed skeletal remains in a new grave of another individual (K12). Churchyard at Metylovice (district Frýdek-Místek; excavated by Archaia Olomouc, o.p.s., in 2009 under leadership of Peter Kovačik). Photo by Erika Průchová.

Figure 3. Secondary deposit – exhumed remains of two individuals. Churchyard at Poběžovice (district Domažlice; excavated by Museum of West Bohemia in Pilsen in 2010 under leadership of Martin Čechura). Photo by Erika Průchová.

Figure 4. Building activities disturb buried remains. Monastery cemetery in Stříbro (North Pilsen district; excavated in 2008 by Mgr. Martin Čechura from Museum of West Bohemia in Pilsen). Photo by Erika Průchová.
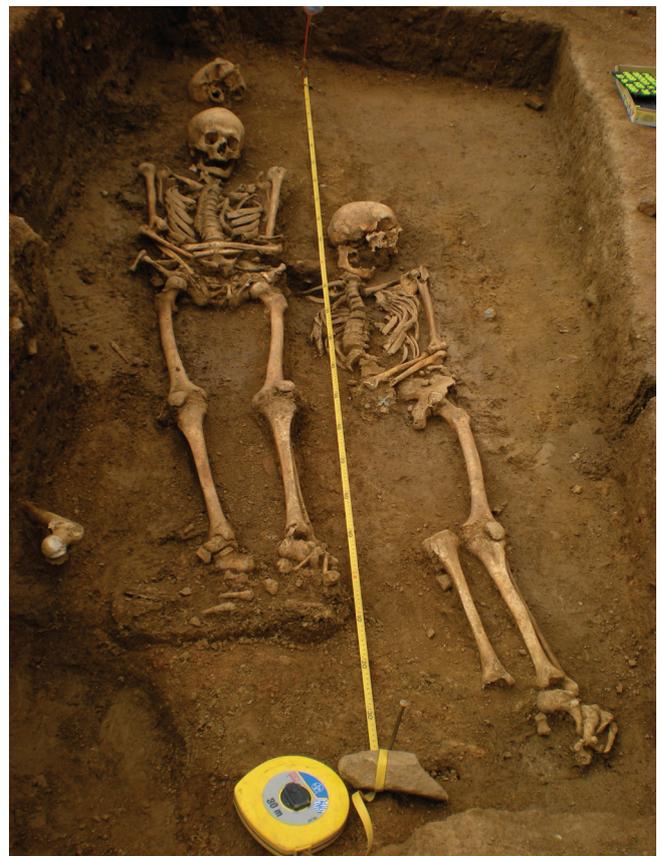

Figure 5. Evidence of older graves disturbed by younger graves are abundant in post-medieval period. Example of partially disturbed older skeletal remains (individuals K37 and K38). Churchyard at Poběžovice (district Domažlice; excavated by Museum of West Bohemia in Pilsen in 2010 under leadership of Martin Čechura). Photo by Erika Průchová.

2.1.2 Requirement of secondary burial

In the past, a well-known and common aim was the secondary burial of remains. Some ritual practices prescribe the primary deposition of the body in order to "clean" the bones of soft tissues. The bones are then exhumed, transported and reburied in the final grave or tomb, where they were intended to remain forever (*e.g.* Černý 1995; Duday 2005, 166; Duday 2009, 14; Duday *et al.* 1990, 31; Schroeder 2001; Sosna 2007). Although, we are aware of this practice from ethnographic and archaeological records, in post-medieval central Europe we find more practical reasons. Official and pious secondary burials of the remains or mummified bodies of known or named individuals arose in the 17th century (Ariès 2000, 106–110). On the basis of written sources we know of the exhumation and transport of the remains of saints. In some cases, soldiers were also exhumed from collective battlefield graves and re-deposited in, for example, monastery sanctuaries which then served as memorials (Ariès 2000, 301). Secondary burial requirements based on the wishes of living relatives is also known in families of higher status, such as aristocrats or prominent dignitaries in different spheres of social life and organisation (Ariès 2000, 107–108). This might arise as a result of family migrations, as well as spatial transformation of funerary areas (cemeteries, crypts) used by the family, such as the closure of an old cemetery, or the foundation of a new family tomb). As a rule, men had their wives or children re-buried (for examples see Král 2004, 237–238). Exhumation was also done to expatriate the deceased from a cemetery based on some other circumstantial reasons (see Lauwers 2002 [1999], 682).

In limited areas, such as the interiors of sacred buildings or a cemetery area delineated by a fence or wall, there was no place needed for the newly deceased. Grave diggers usually knew the rate of soft tissue decay, so old graves could be intentionally opened to exhume skeletal remains and relocate them piously – opening up space for the newly deceased. Christians, where they were the mainstream religious identity, tried to preserve remains until the coming of the Messiah. Their remains, from re-opened or disturbed graves (even anonymous ones), were often re-deposited at a special site, such as a new grave, ossuary-pit, or charnel house (some cemeteries had official rules regulating treatment of such remains, *e.g.* Ariès 2000, 107; Kostka, Šmolíková 1998, 829).

This kind of impact and re-deposition, well known in the post-medieval archaeological record, can be easily detected and interpreted in some cases, even when excavating a multilevel cemetery. During grave excavation a key question is whether it is a primary burial that was re-opened with some skeletal parts removed (in particular the skull, vertebrae, long and large bones), or whether it is a secondary burial of exhumed remains. In the latter, the anatomical order of the skeleton would likely be disturbed, with smaller bones or teeth missing (Duday 2009, 89–92). However, the absence of small bones could also be caused by post-depositional natural processes. Therefore, attention should be paid to the study of the natural setting, such as the chemical properties of layers and soils. Archaeologically we can distinguish several types of secondary deposition: older bones which are deposited piously into a new grave (fig. 2), or deposited in special ossuaries or charnel house. Human remains can also remain within the burial layer, in most cases in the form of dispersed and isolated bones or bone fragments (Boddington 1987), though sometimes large portions of a skeleton are found (Figure. 3).

2.1.3 Requirement to re-use remains

Human remains could be exhumed in order to *repurpose them in a living culture*. As in ancient times, magical power was still ascribed in this period to human remains (primarily teeth, skulls, bones; *e.g.* Navrátilová 2004, 280, 284). The cemetery served as a sacred place and graves and buried remains were inviolate. On the other hand, the cemetery was also associated with impurity and fear of death or the spirits of the dead. Due to their presumed prophylactic power, bones were used as raw material for amulets (Ariès 2000, 81). The healing properties of dead tissues used in traditional ethnomedicine were rejected by 19th century medicine (Ariès 2000, 80–82, 84). But the oral tradition retained stories about bold men who would dishonour a cemetery by looting bones and skulls in order to obtain prestige (Navrátilová 2004, 284). Unworked, or as a part of an artefact, these remains became *memento mori* – reminders of death (*e.g.* rosary made of vertebrae; Ariès 2000, 81). During the 18th century a boom in clinical dissections (as a part of anatomical education or the private activities of interested persons) led to a lack of available corpses. Thus, the required bodies were substituted by corpses exhumed illegally (stealing corpses noted in official French documents see Ariès 2000, 90–93). The exhumation of bodies or re-opening of graves in association with necrophilia (whether in a poetic or literal sense), appearing in 18th century literature, is not thought to be factual (Ariès 2000, 99–106).

The identification of motives is very complicated. One key indicator is recognition of secondary excavation, disarticulation and the absence of certain needed body parts or bones. In some cases we cannot be sure whether the total absence of remains indicates very poor preservation, careful exhumation (dissection material, re-burial, destruction), or a cenotaph. When only some parts of the body or skeleton are missing, such as skulls, long bones or vertebrae, we can surmise it was done intentionally, before or after decay of soft tissues. But we cannot explain motive. Studying patterns of missing elements in reliable contexts can take us a step forward.

2.2 Intentional secondary manipulation with grave goods

When manipulating artefacts, we can distinguish two basic processes – additional deposition or removal. The reason for *additional deposition* of grave goods (artefacts, substances) could arise from the treatment of dangerous or unwanted deceased (*e.g.* coin in mouth, pin in heel, poppy seed to be counted; Chorváthová 1993). On the other hand, artefacts

were also added in respect of the wishes of the spirits of the deceased (*e.g.* communicated in dreams; Horváthová 1993).

Removal of artefacts may be motivated by requirements similar to those mentioned above – because of magic and protective powers – which artefacts obtain through contact with the deceased, during the time they spent in the grave, or due to the courage of the individual who disturbed sacred ground (Navrátilová 2004, 284). The transfer of artefacts can be assumed in cases of secondary burials connected with the foundation of a new tomb or with family migration. The study of *looting activities* (motivated by private collections, illegal trade), known especially during earlier periods (*e.g.* Sládek, Kavánová 2003; Sosna 2007), cannot be neglected in post-medieval studies. Historical records tell of tombs of individuals or families of higher social status. Among convicted thieves were also parsons (*e.g.* crypt of Švamberk dynasty on Švamberk castle, Novobilský, Rožmberský 1997, 34). Looting was not restricted to only valuable items (such as jewellery) or other attractive parts of grave goods, but included construction items, such as the metals found in noble tombs and crypts (Brachtel, Procházka, Rožmberský 1994, 78–79; Král 2004, 236; Novobilský, Rožmberský 1997, 34). Illegal disturbance (supported by widespread use of metal detectors) can be assumed on the sites of abandoned or abolished graveyards, but also in contemporary cemeteries.

Unless we notice clear edges, different fill of secondary excavation, or apparent disturbance of skeletal remains and grave goods, we cannot assume removal based only on the absence of expected grave goods. From a taphonomic point of view, the identification of artefact removal is quite complicated. If an item was not placed on, below or in close vicinity of the body, then the skeletal remains will not show traces of disturbance. Even if we notice some disarticulation or disturbance of skeletal remains, we cannot be sure that it was caused by the removal of artefacts. In cases of small-scale impact this can sometimes not be distinguished from plant or faunal bioturbation.

2.3 Intentional impacts directed at funeral object in general

The requirement of *secondary deposition* was not related only to human remains or grave goods. Grave soil was sometimes transported and used for the healing powers and fecundity attributed to it (Ariès 2000, 81). *Additional burials* in the same grave pit are also known from the archaeological record (*e.g.* children with their parents; *e.g.* Kostka, Šmolíková 1998, 829).

The cemetery reconstruction and sanitization conducted for hygienic reasons has been discussed. *The closure of a cemetery or its relocation* could have been caused by rebuilding or the extension of sacred buildings to which it was originally attached, by hygienic threats (open graves, impurity, epidemics, bad smell and air fastening decay of food), religious controversy, urban development, etc. (e.g. Ariès 2000, 34–38, 69–70, 223–228, 244–246). The remains were exhumed and re-deposited, used as a waste in later building activities, or totally destroyed (*ibidem*).

Vandalism should be noted as well. Whole graveyards, in particular those containing graves of ethnic or religious minorities (*e.g.* Jews), have been intentionally damaged and looted (Král 2004, 236). Anger was directed towards aristocracy or a particular dynasty, such as the damage of the Švamberk crypt at Švamberk castle evidenced in 1960's (Novobilský, Rožmberský 1997, 36). Remains impacted in this manner are found disarticulated, dislocated, sometimes dispersed as single bones in layers and within deposits abundant in skeletal remains.

Scientific interest and research of mortuary contexts also falls into this category. Beginning several centuries ago, archaeological fieldwork is a mechanism of the total destruction of a funerary objects, graves and areas. Although these activities are documented, the quantity and quality of information and finds are impacted by circumstances (*e.g.* time, budget, equipment, skills and honesty of excavators), paradigms (theories and methods), and other considerations. Some remains of scientific research can be highly distinctive (*e.g.* sections on special blocks left for future research), while others are not.

2.4 Unintentional (accidental) impacts

Intensive burial activities in delineated areas were discussed above. In some stratified cemeteries it seems that graves of young children are disturbed more than graves of older ones or adults (*e.g.* Průchová 2007). In addition there are some other known activities that could disturb older graves, such as *building or reconstructing activities* related to the extension of important sacred buildings (Král 2004, 239) or the erection of new buildings (Ariès 2000, 70–71). In the Middle Ages graveyards were intentionally used as *places of social events* involving dances and other activities, which could cause damage to partially-opened or shallow graves (Lauwers 2002 [1999], 682). There are also modern descriptions of graveyards serving as *pastures* (*e.g.* Ariès 2000, 70–71).

It is obvious that unintentional impacts can cause damage to remains (Figure 4). Funerary activities disturbing older graves can be detected on the basis of assemblages of exhumed bones deposited in a new grave (Figure 2 and 5), sometimes in a special pit within a new grave; or the finds of single bones (or their fragments) in surrounding layers. The latter could be the result of the complete damage of grave (without exhumation of bones). To distinguish between these, solely on the basis of single bone finds, is almost impossible. The remains of buildings that have damaged graves are usually easily detected and interpreted by archaeologists.

3. Conclusions

Our survey of the historical record has identified a wide range of motives behind the disturbance of, and damage to, graves or human remains in the post-medieval period. However, some of these motivations have not been considered in archaeological interpretation. The cultural context influences

the ways in which the deceased individuals, funerary objects and areas should be regarded and treated. The archaeological context should be studied in conjunction with the contemporary local cultural context. In this paper we tried to show that the study of intentional secondary burial practices and disturbances in post-medieval period is a legitimate pursuit and should be considered in detail.

The motivations presented should not be considered a complete list. Aside from the theoretical and methodical considerations presented here more attention needs to be paid to our interaction with archaeological record (especially human remains) during fieldwork. Careful excavation and observation of the archaeological context cannot be properly managed without a simultaneous and precise taphonomic study. We would like to emphasise the current level of fruitful cooperation between archaeologists and biological anthropologists in research focused on burial objects and areas, involving theoretical considerations and questions, fieldwork, post-excavation work, final interpretation and publication.

Acknowledgements

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